



Fiction

Group 4

Blindspot

Canadian International School of Hong Kong, Tian, Jennie – 17

My vision cleared slowly. I blinked as if refocusing from a tantalizing daydream. The blue tint drained from the sky. My hunter's bag hit the floor with a thud, and I scrambled to pick it up. The water dragons my team had been hunting were nearing the start of their migration period and this was the last week we could find them.

"Are you ill?" My mother's voice sounded from behind me. "You seem disorientated."

"I'm fine, just a bit sleepy," I said, but when I turned around to give her a quick hug, the ceiling spun. I clutched her shoulders for balance. Colors flashed across my vision for a split-second. *What's happening to me?* I should have questioned the symptoms, but lost in importance of today's hunt, I smiled and pushed myself backwards. "I have to go or I'll be late for work."

"Here, take this." She handed me a bottle of water. "Your dad packed this for you." I didn't stop to think how he always left the house too early in the morning, how it was always my mom that sent me off before work.

"I'll see you at dinner." I shoved the canteen in my bag and sprinted out the door. The sun peaked out from behind the rolling sand dunes, sky-line washed in shades of gray. If I had known better, I wouldn't have wondered for a split-second if muted skies meant rain.

I sped through my family's private garden where I used to play, but now the plants could barely stand. Alarm sparked in my chest, but I didn't have time to wonder why the leaves that shone green only yesterday were wilting.

Our village sprawled out in the shape of a splash with the oasis as the centerpiece. Most fought to live closer to the water, with the poorest forced onto the outskirts and only a few poets and scholars choosing to live in the abandoned caves below. The heat struck my skin. Silhouettes rippled under the slashing sun. I blinked and the colors disappeared. The tall trees that grew near the oasis bent over with leaves stained yellow and brown, almost reaching for the shrunken oasis. I almost froze in my tracks at the retreating water but I couldn't show up late for work.

Sweat burned my forehead by the time I made it to the hunting grounds, but my team was nowhere to be found. Only one person stood in the center, my father.

"Dad? What are you doing here? Where's everyone else?" I looked around but the armor rack was untouched and only one pair of footsteps shifted the sand.

"They'll be here soon. I knew you'd arrive first." His silver lined jacket glistened in the flaming sunlight.

"Is there something wrong?" I stepped into the clearing, casting looks over my shoulder. I didn't remember the last time I saw him smile; maybe it was weeks ago on my birthday. He had arrived home from work late, after we had already finished dinner. He lit the cake, gave me a shiny wrapped gift and I hadn't seen him until the next morning.

"Did you feel anything strange this morning?" he asked. "Perhaps something unnatural?"

"Where are you going with this?" I asked. If I had looked closer, I would have seen him smirk.

"You became the captain of the hunting team at age 20. You were the first to successfully track down a water dragon. You never miss your shot. I don't think I tell you enough how proud I am of you." He rested his hand on my shoulder, and my mouth ran dry. I wanted to bask in the privilege of his gaze, before he could glance away five seconds later. "I think it is time you learned the truth. The majority of this town is under the influence of a mind control spell."

"That's... not possible," I stumbled over my words. Magic was only wielded by the dragons and to a lesser extent, other animals. If the scientists had discovered a way for humans to use such powers, we would have known by now, *right?*

"The trees, the oasis, the sky, I'm sure you've noticed them on the way here?" He pressed on.

"They're... different. What happened to them?" I whispered.

“They’ve always been that way, at least for the past few years. It’s just that your perception was altered,” He explained.

“I was under this mind control?” I blinked a few times. “But why did you take me off the spell? Why now?”

“You must understand that was because I had to wait until you were old enough to trust with such sensitive information.” He squeezed my shoulder and smiled. *He trusts me?* I froze, as if a twitch could fracture this moment. “The mind control only makes one more agreeable to government action and affects the senses, but the effects become harder to reverse as time passes.”

“How long have you been doing this?” I asked.

“I originally suggested a version of this idea to the government when some of the citizens started protesting. Looks like they enjoyed it enough to fund this.” He grinned.

“But the water dragons.” The words tumbled from my mouth. “Does that mean they can no longer regulate the oasis?” He lifted his hand from my shoulder, but the lingering pressure still left an indent.

“You lead the hunting party which takes the horns of the water dragons, killing them in the process.” He paused, almost hesitant. “The state of the oasis is just a side effect.”

What? I swayed slightly without my dad as an anchor.

“But I didn’t see anything change. I thought everything was fine.”

“Once again, I wish I didn’t have to hide this from you.” He crossed his arms.

“But we *need* the oasis, how are we going to survive out here?” My stomach lurched. “What about the villagers?” I shouldn’t have even asked; he had never given a second thought to those who lived farther from the oasis.

“They don’t understand,” He sighed. “I’m sure you know how valuable a water dragon’s body parts are.” His eyes gleamed and I didn’t doubt for a second he was talking about money. I wanted to run, but the weight of my dad’s gaze pinned me in place.

“But our water supply—”

“Don’t worry.” He cut me off. “I would never let anything happen to you or the rest of our family.”

But you wouldn’t mind if the rest of our village rotted? The thought of saying that out loud felt dangerous in my head.

“There’s one week left to capture the dragons and the government expects a shipment soon.” His voice cut the air like a blade.

“You want me to keep doing this, even after knowing the truth?” I forced the venom out of my voice.

“These discoveries are everything we worked for. Everything *I* worked for.” All the warmth seeped out of his voice. “Do you know how much favor we currently hold in the government?”

I dipped my head. “Yes, sir.”

He only nodded. “I have matters to attend to, you should prepare for your trip this afternoon.”

“Yes.” I dropped my bag on the floor. He turned around and left without acknowledging my answer. I clenched the hilt of my dagger.

I can’t let this happen. But I didn’t know if I meant it.



The cave stretched out before me. I put a hand up to signal the rest of my team to fall back. The water dragons had been retreating farther and farther underground and acting more defensive.

I nodded to Jasper to follow me into the darkness. I couldn't bring the whole group with me anymore; stealth was crucial and I couldn't afford a mistake.

The light faded behind us. I trailed my gloved fingers along the wall. If I tried to bring everyone, no one would leave the surface; we were all trained in hunting tactics. And the brainwashing spell would have bound them all outside.

Four years ago, I had been preparing for my final assessment, the national one my father had obtained just for me due to his high-ranking position. The rest of the village attended school together but I was kept at home. I had been hunched over my desk, my dad watching from the edge of the room as I took practice test after practice test. His eyes darkened, smile faded as he marked the papers, and when he left for a meeting, I hurled my pencils at the wall.

Jasper's breath crawled down my neck as we inched deeper underground. The dragons must have retreated farther than we'd ever explored. I took a deep breath; the sharp, almost unearthly scent of the beasts tinged the murky air.

Maybe I could follow the wrong path; we could get lost in the maze of tunnels and emerge hours later empty handed. No one would fault us; our task was almost impossible to begin with. The only person who would see through the lie is my dad; he knew I didn't miss. I clenched my jaw.

He had let me take a break from training for a month to focus on my final assessment, but once they had ended, he bought me a new set of daggers and sent me back to the training room. I didn't remember how many hours I had locked myself in to practice, how many times servants had to break in to force water down my throat because I forgot to drink. When he stopped by, I didn't remember any congratulations, any praise, only him saying: *You will get that captain spot. Don't disappoint me.*

The cave seemed to stretch on for hours. My limbs began to ache by the time we reached a gaping pit at the cave floor. A soft blue glow permeated the darkness from below. The water dragon's tail peaked out from the bottom of the hole. I crouched and squinted; the rest of its body was huddled in the corner of the cave. There were no other exits to the pit, the only way out was up.

I motioned Jasper to circle to the other side. She reached into her sheathe and held out an arrow tipped with red, one that would cause an explosion upon hitting its target. I gave a sharp nod. We had discussed tactics for every scenario beforehand. She would fire an explosive arrow to drive the dragon down the only path of escape, right towards me.

And when she fired, she wouldn't think twice, the mirage marring her brain allowed no hesitations.

I slipped my dagger out of my belt. The weak spot of every water dragon is the skin around their horns, and it was my job to hit it. Maybe I could miss my shot. We all knew defensive creatures were the most dangerous.

Jasper raised her bow. I clutched the hilt of my dagger. The tip of the arrow shone in the dim light as it shot through the air.

I didn't flinch when white light swelled at the bottom of the pit and the explosion rippled. I couldn't hear my heartbeat over the water dragon's piercing roar. Blue scales tore through the gaping hole.

I moved without thinking. My blade flew. The hilt of the dagger lodged itself into the dark blue scales that touched the horns. I squeezed my eyes shut and the dragon's cry split the air.



Sand crawled into my shoes on the way home. I had dismissed my team without a celebration or a promise of a victory feast. A single streak of red cut through the sky.

I pushed open the door to my house and dumped my bag on the floor.

“Jade, you’re back!” My dad called from across the room. I kicked off my shoes. “I got word you managed to strike down a water dragon today. I didn’t expect any less considering your prowess.”

I stumbled back until I hit the dining table. The walls swayed. “Are you okay?” He asked.

“I’m fine.” I coughed. My throat burned dry. A servant passed by with a tray of water, and I closed my hand around a glass.

“Wait, don’t drink that.” He reached for my arm but I jerked back. Liquid splashed on the floor. My dad squeezed my shoulder. “Let’s go to my office.”

He led me into the farthest room. I collapsed onto his couch. He grabbed the cup from my hands and clutched it.

“Did you drink the water I packed for you this morning?” he asked.

“Yes, but I got some more from the hunting center,” I rasped.

My dad narrowed his eyes and handed me his own bottle. “Drink this instead.” I gulped down the liquid without a second thought. The outline of his shadow sharpened. If I had looked closer, I would have seen his eyebrows unknit and his shoulders loosen.

“I’m so proud of you.” He smiled. I wanted to lounge in the warmth of his words, but a small flame still festered in my throat.

“For killing animals?” My voice was slurred. I wanted to take back the words but a fog of exhaustion still clouded my head.

“For doing what is needed to be done, even when it isn’t easy.” He crossed his arms.

I gripped the rough fabric of his seat. “But, why does it need to be done?”

“Do you know why we are so well off compared to the rest of the village? It’s because of my hard work, *your* hard work.” He walked closer and I sunk deeper into the couch. “That is why the government rewards us.” The glass shook in his hands.

“So, you’re saying you want to please them?” The images clicked into place. His taut shoulders, the early dawn glow that seeped through my window when I heard him leave the house, didn’t seem so foreign anymore. The dinners he missed, the birthdays he skipped, it wasn’t hard to imagine myself doing the same, but I wouldn’t have admitted that then.

“It’s my job. Don’t tell me you’d rather be one of *them*,” he snapped. I recoiled at the disgust melded into his words. He spun around and slammed the glass of water on his desk. “Don’t tell me you’re taking for granted all the privileges I gave you.”

“I- of course I appreciate it but-” He cut me off by tossing another bottle of water into my hands.

“Drink. I don’t want you to pass out.” I pressed the edge of the opening to my mouth and drank slowly. I eyed the glass sitting at the end of his desk, one tap away from crashing onto the floor.

The events of this morning rushed back into my head. *Your dad packed this for you.* My mom’s words clung to my thoughts. My dad never packed me anything. His desperation for me to not drink what the servant had prepared, the fog that began to lift slightly as I drank his own supply of water. It was more than just dehydration affecting my body.

“The water... it’s tainted.” The words weighed like lead on my lips. My dad didn’t move, eyes piercing through me as if observing a specimen. Fire stung and pulsed in my chest like a heartbeat. “Was Mom in on this too? Or was she just being controlled by you?” The question clawed at my throat.

I clutched my head. *Didn’t I already drink the untainted water?*

“She was not aware.” He didn’t meet my gaze.

“Your precious *job*,” I mumbled. The furniture swayed like I was trapped in a daydream. “What’s going to happen to the rest of our village? What are they going to drink when it dries? And it will dry now that I- now that the last dragon had been hunted down.”

‘The effects become harder to reverse as time passes.’ My dad’s words jumped into my head. I’m getting too old to break free.

“Can I not trust you? I was hoping you didn’t need to have your perception altered.” He narrowed his eyes.

Trust. I slumped back into the chair. “Just tell me, what are you planning to do?”

“I suppose there’s nothing you can do even if I do tell you.” He chuckled. “You’re right, we can’t live here anymore. I’ll be taking our entire family and we’ll move. We don’t need to bring anyone else.”

The lights burned across my vision. My head throbbed. I thrust the bottle of water my dad gave me back into his hands. Would I be able to do it? Pack up my belongings, board a cart and leave the dying oasis without a second glance?

But if I sped outside and sounded some sort of alarm, nothing would happen. No one would listen. No one would care. I’d only be greeted by an expanse of confused faces.

“You know I was looking for someone to help me in this operation. Someone I could pass it onto in the future,” He sighed. Icy claws seized my chest.

If I drank the tainted water now, would he be able to make me lucid again? If I dumped the contents of the whole cup into my mouth, how long would it take for the fog to ever lift again?

Would I be able to continue his legacy? His legacy of hunting animals to extinction, following his whims like a loose pebble thrown by a raging current.

No, I can’t do it. My stomach swirled. I jumped from my seat and lunged for the cup.

“Get back here.” My dad growled. He grabbed my arm but I twisted out of his grasp, smiling a little when I remembered my physical prowess compared to him.

I emptied the liquid into my mouth and my vision dimmed again.

An Accident on the Silk Road, featuring Three Boys and A Somewhat Annoying Camel

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It had been 18 months since they left Constantinople. When they left, the caravan consisted of 5 carts, 15 camels and 10 donkeys. Now, all of the carts were destroyed, and whatever was left of the goods they had were gone. Most of their men laid on the scorching desert sand in pools of their own blood. There were once 15 of them, but only 3 remained. The animals' leashes had been cut, and startled mounts could be seen scattered about the dunes. There was no point in getting them back. Olcan tipped his waterskin over. A small droplet of water dripped out.

"Stop that! You're just wasting the water!"

Olcan looked up. Servet stood over him, glaring at him through the harsh sunlight.

"It was only a droplet. It can't do much for us anyway." Olcan squinted back at his friend.

"It doesn't matter! It'll become a habit if you do it too much." Servet was getting himself worked up again, as usual. Olcan sighed. "When do you think Tura is coming back?"

Tura was the third survivor of the bandit's ambush. He had gone to look for more water, but he hadn't returned yet. The sun was starting to set.

A couple hours previously, when the caravan had been travelling through a particularly deserted part of the Silk Road, they had been ambushed by a group of bandits, who had destroyed all of their carts, taken all of the goods they were carrying, and had killed all of the travellers except for the youngest three: Olcan, Servet and Tura. Tura was the oldest of the three, and had hidden the other two during the ambush. Because of this, the three managed to survive.

A gust of wind blew through the desert sand. The sun had set, and it was getting colder.

"We should build a fire." Servet walked around what remained of the carts and began picking out pieces of wood that were suitable for burning.

After a restless night, they started preparing for the journey ahead. Tura had returned the previous evening, but had no luck finding water. Olcan had unearthed a map from the ruins, as well as happening upon an untouched waterskin, and they packed what little they had and embarked on their journey.

"How much longer did you say it was going to take?" Servet huffed, his face red from sunburn.

"It should be near here. I just saw a landmark back there, we shouldn't be far. Another day and we'll be there."

Tura wiped his forehead.

"Another DAY? And that's near to you?" Servet groaned.

They were passing under a large sand dune, which overshadowed them as they walked.

Servet slumped down next to a small clump of yellowing grass. "Let's just rest here for a while, and then we can try to find it from the top of the dune." even hot-headed Servet couldn't keep his snarky attitude for long in the desert heat.

They had been walking towards a small encampment for a couple of days. They had captured a camel (from the ruined caravan) to ride on, but the one they chose decided after a couple of hours that he didn't like his new riders, and kicked them off. They now had it on a leash, and were planning to sell the camel for some money for food. (And some new clothes, since the camel had taken a particular interest in the taste of Servet's tunic, much to Servet's annoyance.)

"I'll go up to look, I'm not that tired." Olcan offered.

Tura glanced at him from the map. "Even if you're not, you should rest. It may not be far, but you haven't had much since morning."

"I'm not that thirsty." Olcan protested. Servet raised his eyebrows at him from his seat in the sand. No one believed him. "I'll just go up and look." and he was gone before Tura could protest.

"No stopping him." Servet shrugged. The camel decided this was the perfect time to have another taste of Servet's tunic.

"Hey!"

Olcan trudged to the top of the dune and gazed over the sea of sand. There was nothing but more dunes in the distance. He looked a little more to his left. There was a plateau where the sand flattened down, and a cliff a little farther away, with what seemed to be a small spire protruding from the edge. He squinted and walked up the dune, craning his neck. He saw a splash of green, and small dots moving like ants. People and trees! He jumped up with excitement. Olcan half-sprinted, half-fell down the dune.

"D'you think he saw anything interesting up there? He's taking his time." Servet stood and stretched.

"Guys! GUYS! I found it! I found the encampment!" Olcan stumbled and fell into the sand.

"WhAT?" the other two looked in astonishment.

"Yeah! It's right over there! There's people and trees!" Olcan pointed to the cliff.

"But the encampment should have been at least another day's walk!" Tura scratched his head in confusion, could the map have been wrong? "Are you sure it wasn't some kind of mirage? You haven't had any water for the past couple of hours!"

"I saw it! Clear as day!" Olcan couldn't control his grin.

Curious. Why wasn't it on the map? Tura thought. "We should start making our way there then."

It took a while to reach the cliff, and just as midday sun rose into the sky, the trio arrived at the edge of the plateau, overlooking the bustling scenes below.

"Finally! Civilization!" Olcan whooped.

"We've only been on the road for three days, Ol." Servet crossed his arms and tugged his sleeve from the camel's mouth. "How are we gonna get down there anyway?" He scanned the edge of the cliff.

"We might have to go around and enter from the other side." Tura pointed forward, where there was a bridge carrying carts and people over a small stream.

"How are we going to be able to get over there if we can't even get down from this cliff?" Servet sniffed.

"We might be able to find a way down if we walk along the edge." Olcan suggested.

"Good idea." Tura strode to the left.

"As if we have any other option." Servet muttered under his breath.

After walking along the cliff for a while, they found an area where the cliff had eroded and had fallen down, creating a sandbank that allowed them to get down from the top of the cliff. They made their way around the stream that surrounded the area, and finally got to the bridge. From this perspective, this place was larger than they thought.

The trio stepped off the bridge, and gazed at the sight before them. A large temple spread its red roofs over the cliffside, carts and pilgrims filled the ground before it. Large stones and sand were everywhere, and the smell of incense filled the air.

"This must be a pilgrimage site, no wonder it wasn't one of our destinations." Tura looked down at the map. "I think I've heard of this place before, I believe it's called the 'Thousand Buddha Caves'."

"Huh, interesting." Servet looked up at the temple. "This place is huge, but it's strange why it wasn't on the map."

"Maybe because the map was made specifically for merchants?" Olcan looked over at Tura.

"Most likely, yes, the nearby city is marked on the map." Tura raised his head from the parchment.

"Then we won't be able to sell the camel here then?" Servet sighed.

"We'll just have to wait until we get to the city," Tura shrugged. "But we'll be able to stock up on some supplies for the journey there, albeit it won't be as difficult as walking through the desert." The three pressed into the flood of pilgrims in front of the temple.

"What did she say?"

"Are you getting a good price?"

"Can you ask her if we can get some food as well?"

"Can you two STOP blabbering for a minute?! I'm trying my best here!" Tura furrowed his brow. They stood in front of a small desk, behind which stood an impatient innkeeper of a small inn which they had found after walking

around, and who's nerves the trio had been getting on for the past fifteen minutes. Tura was busy haggling for a room for the night (who was the only one of the three that could read and speak some of the local language, and even then was mostly relying on a small translation manual), and as the other two had just finished putting the camel into the stables, Tura had managed to get a small room for a fairly good price, considering the pitifully paltry bag of money they had left. "Alright. So, I managed to get us a small room for a pretty cheap price, and we still have enough money for supplies and some food. We will have to sell the camel soon if we want to eat. And maybe find a way to make money, but I think it'll be manageable."

"So no food?" Olcan pouted.

"We'll have to sort that out ourselves. I'm sure there's at least one person selling food here." Tura smiled. "Come on, let's go."

After a while, they happened upon a small food stall, and had a meal. The room at the inn was incredibly cramped.

It has been two days since they arrived at the Thousand Buddha Caves. They had managed to gather enough supplies to last them the short trip to the nearby city, Dun Huang, and then a little after that. The newly acquired supplies included: an updated map of all of the possible places where they could stop along the Silk Road, new clothes for everyone, some rations and a better translation book they had bought for a much too high price from another travelling merchant that was just passing by.

"The city will be able to offer you many opportunities, especially for young men like you!" the merchant had waved them off with a smile, "I'll see you around when you get there!"

Olcan eyed the merchant's retreating back suspiciously. "He seems a little weird to me. Are you sure we've not been scammed?"

"Oh, c'mon Ol, if you had been travelling in the desert by yourself for a long time, you would get a little eccentric too, wouldn't you?" Servet smirked and patted Olcan reassuringly on the back. "And even if we have been scammed, it's a little too late to go running after him, don't you think?" He made a face.

Tura sighed and flipped through the booklet. "It seems accurate enough, it'll definitely help us find a buyer for that camel."

A collective groan could be heard from the other two at the mention of that camel. It had somehow repelled all buyers from it.

"Let's just start making preparations for tomorrow." Olcan sniffed, the other two chiming in their agreement.

Preparations made, they set off to Dun Huang in the morning. The journey took the better part of the day under the scorching sun, and they arrived at the city gates just as the egg yolk sun was setting against a rose-gold sky. As the night fell, oil lamps were lit, and the city seemed to grow restless. The flickering lights from the lamps danced across the half-moon shaped lake that wrapped itself around the city. The sand dunes in the distance loomed over them like mountains of powdered amber.

"Woah...I never thought that the desert would look so pretty." Olcan took a deep breath, inhaling the smells of the city.

Tura nodded. "It is very beautiful. But we're not here to sightsee. Look around and see if there are any animal traders nearby, or a merchant caravan."

Olcan grimaced. Right. Can't forget that. He thought, and couldn't help but notice Servet's widening grin at the mention of an animal trader.

"Huh, look over there, isn't that one of the caravans that set off from Constantinople a little before us?" Servet suddenly pointed to a small group of people who were dressed like merchants, huddling around a table playing a game of cards. Olcan immediately recognised one of them. Isin Kiraz, the son of a wealthy merchant who had decided to jump onto the nearest caravan headed off on the Silk Road as soon as he turned of age.

"That's Isin!" Olcan exclaimed.

"Isin? Wait, you mean Isin Kiraz? Why would he be here in the middle of nowhere? Isn't his family really wealthy?"

Servet hissed, alarmed. "Also, keep your voice down! You're attracting strange looks!"

"Isin Kiraz? Hmm, nope never heard of him." Tura remarked nonchalantly.

"You've never heard of him before? His father is one of the wealthiest people in Constantinople, and you say you've never heard of him before?" Servet gaped at Tura in disbelief.

"Apparently his father is close friends with the Sultan." Olcan whispered.

"And his son is out here in the middle of the desert, 18 months travel away from home?" Servet narrowed his eyes suspiciously.

"Maybe he ran away?"

"What if he eloped?"

"Or someone is trying to assassinate him!"

"Oh! What if he was kicked out of his house?" The two younger boys were so busy gossiping in hushed voices, Servet didn't realise that the camel had started snacking on his (new) shirt.

"ENOUGH." The two swivelled around to see a disgruntled and (very) annoyed Tura. "I don't care who he is, or who his father is, or whether he's running from an assassin or not. He's just going to bring us trouble. Let's go." he turned on his heel and marched off towards a small stable with the camel's leash in hand.

"Wait! Tura! Shouldn't we at least talk to them? They could be the key to getting us back to Constantinople!"

Olcan rushed after him.

"Huh? What do you mean, 'getting us back to Constantinople'?" Tura raised an eyebrow. "I thought we were going to continue to look for jobs or apprenticeships?"

"Yeah! Back in Constantinople! Did you think we were actually going to try to get a job here?" Olcan slowed down beside the older boy.

"Oh."

"What do you mean, 'Oh.'?"

"I- didn't think we were actually going back."

"What?!" Olcan looked at Tura in disbelief. "This might just be the last chance we have to get home!"

"And what do I do when we get home?" Tura retorted. "You might be able to go back to your family, but I can't! That apprenticeship was everything I had! It kept me from living on the streets, begging for food!" his voice shook. Tura had told the other two everything. That he never expected to go back to Constantinople after setting out on this trip, and had never really wanted to. That he had decided that, since he had no one waiting for him back home, he might as well never go back.

"Maybe you'll find another apprenticeship?" Olcan begged.

"Unlikely. Most of the positions have been filled, and I can be sure the ones that haven't will accept a random boy asking for work!" Tura sighed. "It will be for the best if I stay here. You never know, maybe I'll be better off here."

"You never know if there is gonna be someone that will take you back in Constantinople! And you're not alone, you have us!"

"Yes, but for how long? Think realistically, Ol, you're probably going to go back to your family, and Servet is going to do the same. I don't have those types of connections, Ol, you have to understand that." Tura sighed again.

"But, what are you going to do then?" Servet frowned.

Tura sighed and continued to walk towards the stables, tugging the camel behind him. "I'm...not sure. But I'll find something eventually."

Over a week had passed since they had arrived in Dun Huang and Tura's confession. They had managed to sell the camel (much to Servet's relief), with Tura keeping the money (because "You'll need it!"). Servet and Olcan plucked up their courage to talk to the merchants from Isin's caravan, and found out that they were heading back to Constantinople soon after they had arrived (something about a sandstorm and losing a couple carts), and that they would happily bring the two boys back to Constantinople in exchange for tending to the animals. The day of their departure was swiftly arriving, and as Olcan and Servet (who had been sulking for the past few days) were getting ready to leave with the caravan, they saw a familiar figure strolling towards them.

"Tura!" they cried out in unison. The older boy was nowhere to be seen for the entire morning, and Olcan was getting worried that he wouldn't be there to say goodbye...

"Sorry for not seeing you two, I was talking to a spice merchant, and he said that he would be leaving for Chang'an soon, and that I could go with him, and potentially get an apprenticeship there." Tura smiled, albeit a little sadly.

"Are you sure you don't want to go back with us? We might never see each other again." Olcan pouted.

"I'm sure. I know that there won't be anything waiting for me back in Constantinople. I will miss you two, but don't be sad, I'm sure we might meet again in the future." Tura reassured, but Olcan could hear the melancholy tone in his voice.

"I sure hope we will." Servet suddenly spoke up. "If you don't, I'll make sure...I'll make sure, uh..." He scowled at his loss of words. "You- You better come back and visit us! Or else, I'll...I'll haunt you in your sleep!" He clenched his fists.

Tura chuckled. "Alright, I will, but you guys take care of yourselves will you? Oh, and Olcan, make sure Servet doesn't get into too many fights, and say hello to you families for me, will you?"

"We will." Both agreed.

A loud "Come on, it's time to go!" came from the front of the caravan. They were leaving.

"Well, I guess this is goodbye." Tura smiled again, a little brighter, but Olcan couldn't help but notice the sadness in his eyes.

"We'll see you again Tura! Goodbye!" Olcan and Servet said in unison and waved as the carts started to move. Servet hopped on the back of a retreating cart, and helped Olcan up.

They waved goodbye until the other disappeared on the horizon, and even after the midday sun retreated to the edge of the world, and the cold of the desert night started to creep in, they stayed and watched the spot where the other had been, knowing that this was truly goodbye.

My Mother's Return

Carmel School – Elsa High School, Apelbaum, Abigail – 14

Death lay around us. It was a foreign concept until we came in contact with it. The word death comes with multiple interpretations. To some, it is pain. It rips out the happiness of a soul and creates a world that consists of black and white. The occasion of loss drains the life out of those surrounding an individual. However, to some, death is life. It gives the chance to rid all past pain and suffering. It means having the chance to achieve a state of peace, and rebirth into a new life. I believe in the second interpretation.

As the darkening, calm wind drifted across the sky, the trees sat silently alongside my house, and my room filled with the humid air that surrounded the city of Dunhuang. I lay on my bed in silence in awe of the painting that sat in my hands. It was an unblemished, pleasant painting of a rather substantial complex. My mother had given me this painting a couple of years prior to her passing. It was the most monumental artifact I had ever received.

My mother passed away in 1913, two years ago. Until this day, nobody has found out the cause of this tragedy. The last time I saw my mother, we stood outside of our house as I left for school. I wrapped my arms around her, both arms resting on her waist, as her warm, mellow hands stroked my back. I felt a sense of trust, nurture. As I slowly removed my hands from her waist, she mentioned the importance of the painting that she had given to me, and although she hadn't explained to me why I never doubted her. That was the last time I heard her speak to me. The pain of not being able to wrap my arms around my mother's waist hurts me every day. After the death of my mother, my father had been defeated for months on end. As was I. It was an adjustment, one that we yet struggle to live with.

I consider myself an aesthete. Art breaks the barriers of my fatalism and hopelessness, as it brings out the affection I carry for those around me. Since my youth, art has been my escape from reality when I most needed it, especially after my mother's death. It has broadened my horizons on the world around me and has allowed me to express my sentiments and desires. Art undeniably brings out all the hidden aspects of one's mind through a single paintbrush, pencil, or mold. Four years ago on my birthday, I was given a painting by my mother which she had painted twenty-two years ago, and subsequently, it has been my inspiration since. I am now 16, the year is 1915, and art is the only thing that has kept me hopeful.

"Jia li" my father called rather aggressively. I quivered as my paintbrush stroked the canvas in the opposite direction. As my body sensed the urge to stand up, my paintbrush took control of my hand. The strokes were smoother than a baby's skin and flower than a dress in the wind. The bristles on my brush were rough and bristly, yet the moment they contacted water, each bristle became so delicate. After dinner, I hurried back to my room to complete my painting. Each painting I produced had a specific structure to it. A voice in my mind decided this structure, and it has become the base of nearly every painting I have created.

This structure repeatedly begins the same. Seven horizontal lines are drawn and then detail and color are added. Although I am the artist, the voice completes my artwork for me. This voice (my consciousness, I presumed has been with my art since the moment I received my first painting. It has been both my enemy and my savior. Through the discomfort this voice has created for me, my painting structures have only become more visible and defined. Regardless of my attempt to rid these structures, they consistently find their place in my art. I have accepted this, nearly.

I was at ease until Monday morning approached. School has never been my forte, therefore it has become the time I dread most. As the clock neared 7:00 am, I hastened out of bed and brushed my long, silky black hair, which some would consider darker than the night sky. I changed out of my white pajama pants which hung loosely on my legs, and into my school uniform, which fit rather tight. I flipped my red collar so it sat correctly on my t-shirt. Hurrying out of the house, I grabbed my backpack. As I walked to school at a faster pace than normal, it was evident that the main path had been shut down due to the repercussions of a previous typhoon. I took the next left turn onto a path I had not taken before. As I continued to walk, I noticed a picturesque monument. It seemed

as tall as the sky, as stable as a rock, and even more majestic than one could imagine. The colors brown and red reflected off of the monument, while the rocks sat in the background.

When I returned home from school, I was still mesmerized by what I had seen prior. It felt like the inspiration that I had been missing. The urge to visit the monument only grew. Tuesday morning approached. As I finished a painting of a cave that I had been working on for weeks, my structure was yet again visible, regardless of my attempt to break this barrier. This painting sat on my easel in the colors red and brown. I felt a sense of satisfaction. After hours of sitting in silence, contemplating whether to discover the monument and the possible beauty it holds, or refrain from doing so, I made my decision. I was going to follow the path to this place, and document everything I witnessed. I grabbed my sketchbook, which was entirely packed with drawings and paintings, as well as a torch. This wasn't going to take an extensive period, so I hurried out of the house hoping to register as invisible.

From a distance, the rocky structure was apparent, but it was far from what I had envisioned. I proceeded to walk alongside the tall rocky mountains. Holding a minimal amount of items, I staggered and collapsed in a heap, dropping the sketchbook and torch onto the rough, rocky ground. As I struggled to stand up, the same voice in my head told me to withhold from doing so. "Your life is valuable, however, your goal is not" the voice repeated, but if I was the voice in my head, what was stopping me? As I glanced at my surroundings, I noticed the corners of multiple paintings in my sketchbook; the painting my mother had created, along with one of my own. My mother's pneuma gave me the courage to continue my desire to reach the place I intended to go to.

Nearly an hour passed of endless walking, and my fall had broken my spirit, reaching my destination felt more unlikely by the minute. Eventually, I set foot on a long, thin, creaky step that sat beside the monument. However, this monument was like no other. It was a cave, evidently, the Mogao cave. I had heard stories about this cave from my mother when I was little. The beauty it holds, and the secrets hidden within it. The cave was pulchritudinous. I sat silently on the step of the cave as the stars danced across the sky. The clouds shifted from one side of the sky to the other so leisurely. The silence was broken by the sound of the howling wind, however, the rocky mountains respected the silence. I had fallen into a dream of thoughts. It was dark out, so I had come to the conclusion of resting for the night.

As the sun began to rise, I did likewise. I grabbed my sketchbook, however, I left the torch, it felt unnecessary. I felt a light stretch in my knees as I stood up. I then began sketching the outside of the cave. I began with seven horizontal ledges. This was how I commenced my painting which I created the day before. I then added detail to the picture, along with the colors red and brown. I stood there bewildered. The drawing I had just created of the cave that sat in front of me had an exact resemblance to all my previous paintings. "Was this a coincidence?" I wondered to myself. This must have been a coincidence.

At last, I grew the courage to enter the cave. I walked through the two pillars which sat on both sides of the center of the cave. One foot after the other, I entered the cave. I felt an increase in my pulse, but my body felt weak. The darkness of the cave intensified this feeling. I turned around to retrieve my torch from outside for a better view of the environment I was in. I heard a soft creak, leading to a loud slam and before I was able to take another blink, the doors were closed shut.

For a long time, I attempted to open the door. I was unsuccessful. My throat was now dry due to my loud, ongoing, screams. I ran to the higher floors but all exits were closed. Shut. I was stuck with nothing but my sketchbook. As I sat down on the rusty, cold floor, my body trembled from one side to the other. I shakily opened my sketchbook. As I flipped through my sketchbook, I scratched my chin out of curiosity. Throughout all my drawings, there was a familiar pattern, a pattern I had never noticed before. These patterns had some sort of relation to the cave. With no other alternatives, I decided to rely on my art.

The first drawing in my sketchbook was highlighted in the center of the bottom of the page. I immediately hurried back down to the entrance of the first floor. Beside the door sat a scroll and the first word it read was 'Daiyu'. The name of my mother. This was a common traditional name, therefore it must have been yet again, another coincidence.

As the pages brushed against my hand. I noticed it was very darkly shaded on the right side towards the top of the page. I slowly walked to the back of the cave unable to completely comprehend the scenario I was in. Wall paintings surrounded the right side of the wall. The colors were dull, yet so vibrant, like a rainbow on a cloudy day. As I took another step towards the wall, I saw a small woman kneeling on the ground praying to a large buddha above her. The woman in the painting had short and shiny black hair, just like my mother did. As I proceeded to look through the pages in my sketchbook in correspondence to the cave, they all expressed care for the buddha. My mother was a strong believer in the buddha.

As I neared the end of the sketchbook with no real answers, I began to lose hope and my pessimism had taken a toll on me. However, there wasn't anything for me to achieve by doing nothing, so I turned to the next page and followed the place in the cave it had a relation to, the front of the third floor.

As I walked to the front of the room, the words "dukkha" and "Byādhī" were engraved on the floor beneath me. I heard my mother and father argue about these words on various occasions before my mother's passing. I struggled to remember the meaning of the words until this memory was unlocked. Dukkha: pain and suffering, Byādhī: sickness, illness.

Nearly half an hour later, I managed to collect my thoughts and return to my original state. I had trouble understanding what these paintings and words symbolized. With a pounding head, and a body more exhausted than ever before, I was equipped to give up. However I was yet to understand what I was viewing, and so I decided to continue. It was my only hope.

Previous pages took me to paintings, statues, and other forms of art, all of which were not useful, except for one. On the second floor sat three buddhas. The first, an older female with short, shiny hair. The second, an older male. The third, a little girl, with long, silky hair. These buddhas seemed like an exact representation of my family. My mind felt like it was spinning at a hundred miles per hour. My stomach dropped to the ground and it felt as though I was unable to pick it up. I stood there frozen. As I talked myself out of the thoughts in my head, I turned to the last painting in my sketchbook. There sat my mother's painting. Half a smile arose on my face. I began to make my way to the top of the cave. The stairs felt endless, although I knew they would soon come to an end. I continued to make my way up the thin, creaky stairs, I neared the last step. I stepped foot onto the floor and looked at my surroundings. A common theme of this room was the symbolism of fire: colors red and orange, shapes of flames. As I looked around, the smell of acrid smoke surrounded the room. Beside me, writing was evident on the wall. The first apparent sentence read "the cremation of Daiyu Wang", my mother.

My heart began to race as if it were a train on the tracks. I struggled to catch a gasp of air like my lungs had just collapsed. I fell to the ground as my knees dug into the hard, uneven floor. The tears radiated off my face. By the second, the screaming and crying grew louder. Life is unfair, death is a foreign concept until it occurs to somebody that means the world to you. Everything seemed as though it was black and white, and nothing else mattered. For the next hour, I sat against the dusty walls, drowning in my own warm, salty tears. It felt like I was unable to escape a large ocean, and every minute, the current was pulling me further down to the bottom.

My mother had been ill. She kept this a secret from me for my well-being, but was she protecting me? I had millions of questions running through my mind. Did my father know? Why was I not at her cremation? Is she the reason I'm standing in this cave? Nobody replied to my questions.

"I care deeply about you and the painting" whispered the voice in a calm tone. This was the exact phrase my mother told me the last time I saw her. It was like her spirit remained with me even though she was not physically here. Sulking about my mother was an option, yet it was not going to fix the internal pain I was feeling. I needed to leave the cave. As I slowly walked down the stairs, I reached the bottom floor. Holding my mother's painting tightly, I attempted to find another exit. The painting sat in front of my eyes, and a little cross lay in the middle of it, one I had not seen before. Opposite me sat a statue, in the hands of the statue lay a key. The key had not been apparent when I first entered. However, I hastily grabbed the key and opened the large, bulky door. I sprinted out as fast as I was physically able to, and to my home, I returned.

Later that evening I laid against the stiff pillow which sat behind my back while my body sunk into my soft mattress. Attempting to acknowledge the event that had just occurred, I sat there in disbelief and shock. I closed my eyes and fell into a fulfilling dream.

"I was in pain. Every day came with suffering. Being alive was my punishment for a crime I did not commit. I love and respect our gods, and so I accepted my fate. I am at ease, I am surrounded by comfort. I no longer suffer, and you will soon see me again in a new life, my Jia Li." The voice spoke to me, matching the face of my mother. I woke up as my heart dropped to the bottom of my stomach.

"Jia Li" my father called. "Meet your new baby cousin". 'Shan Yu', they named her. The name 'Yu', after my mothers' name. Shan Yu had short, black, shiny hair and a warm persona. The rest of the evening, Shan Yu lay in my arms, with her hands around me, and all I felt was trust and nurture. My mother had returned to me.

The Mogao Grottoes

Carmel School – Elsa High School, Chua, Cate – 13

Chapter 1 - A Visitor

It was a cold and dark night. Martha and James sat on the couch as they clenched their fists while they were watching The Ring.

“Oh no, what’s gonna happen now?! I feel like she’s going to climb out the tv for real!” James shrieked.

“James, stop being paranoid. It’s a movie. I’m getting tired, I’m going to bed now. I’ll leave you alone for a bit.” Martha replied.

She got up and walked her way to the kitchen to grab a snack. Suddenly, she froze. She saw a black figure in her peripheral vision. Tense, she slowly turned her head all the way to the right. Her eyes met this solid black figure, in the shape of a man wearing a cowboy hat, walking from one side of the house to another.

Martha didn’t think much of it, she thought maybe her mind was playing tricks on her since the movie was scary. She headed to their room as James followed her. A wave of tiredness washes over them and they fall asleep quickly.

Chapter 2 - Captured!

James wakes up. He blinks a few times. All he sees is thick fog.

“James, you hear me?”

James paused for a moment, to realize that voice was his dead friend Tyler.

Wait, what, I must be dreaming. This can’t be true. I thought that guy was dead.

He frantically jumped up and ran into the fog, closer to the voice. He ran into trees, scraped himself, and tripped over rocks. He didn’t care that his shirt and jeans were torn and ripped. He was desperate. He ran, his heart pounding faster with each step. He stopped. The fog started to fade away, and in front of him was a huge cave.

“James, where are you?”

“I-I’m here!”

The voice continued to echo out the cave. He ran toward the cave, bumped into something and smashed his face. This time, it wasn’t a stone wall. It made a very distinct noise that would only come from a steel door. Not being able to see anything, he frantically used his hands and felt around, trying to find a doorknob. He finally felt a handle and stepped inside.

A huge disco ball hanging from the ceiling started to glow and spin, filling the chilly, dark room with light. Out of nowhere, a distorted version of the track “一剪梅” started to play. His expression dulled. He rubbed his eyes, and when he finally opened them it was an empty room with indistinguishable symbols scratched on the walls. It looked like the little doodles Tyler would scribble on his math notes when they were in college.

He gulped. He felt uneasy and confused, as he looked around.

“Tyler, where are you!” He yelled, but the music covered his soft voice.

There was no response.

He kept looking around, in hopes of finding Tyler.

But there was not a trace of anyone in the cave.

James shook his head, scrunched his face and sat on the cold floor. He had given up.

BAM!

He jumped up. He looked behind, to see the door had been slammed shut. As he turned his head back, the disco ball fell to the ground, and the track had stopped. The room filled with darkness and silence, as he sat back down in a crouched position, terrified.

Then, he heard a faint noise. He glanced at a wall. A crack started to form on the wall. A thick, gushy black substance started to ooze out of the wall. It started dripping faster and faster, with more and more cracks forming on every other wall. It went from a few droplets to a small stream, before it started to quickly gush out of the crack just like blood from a wound. James started to turn pale. He started to back away while on the ground. The black substance moved in a strange pattern. It didn't expand in all directions, instead, it slowly crept its way toward James, in a zig-zag manner.

James was frozen. He tried to move a leg but it didn't budge. The substance started to move faster as it made its way toward him.

It reached his shoe and crawled up his leg. He could feel the texture of its tentacle-like limbs on his skin. It was rough yet smooth. It felt hot yet cold. It was gross but somewhat pleasant. It reached his lower body. His upper body. His arms. His body was now submerged in this substance. It started to make its way up to his neck then his terror-stricken face, as it started to sink into his eyes, nose and mouth.

Chapter 3 - Confusion

"James, for the last time, I said wake up!"

James woke up, shaking.

"Oh my goodness, what was this dream?!" He exclaimed.

"James, are you alright? You're literally soaked in sweat." Martha peered at him, concerned.

He stared at her but didn't say a word.

"I'm going to grab some breakfast, come down later," she said as she left the room.

That nightmare was weird. It felt real, way too real. Am I going insane or what? Why am I overthinking, it's just another stupid dream. This was the weirdest dream I've ever had.

James walked down the stairs and sat down with his bowl of soup.

Martha leaned forward, and asked, "So, did you sleep well? You said something about your dream earlier in the morning."

"Oh, um, not really," he responded while staring at his soup.

"Did you dream about Tyler? I miss that guy."

"No, I didn't. How do you know? I mean, kinda. It's hard to explain."

"You know, yesterday night I saw this figure wearing a cowboy hat walk from one side of the house to another. I swear, you and I were the only ones here and I made sure to lock the doors. Weird right?"

"Yeah, yeah." James replied. He didn't look like he was paying attention, as he couldn't stop thinking about the dream he had last night.

"Okay, whatever. Well I have to do something with the group. Don't forget about today. We're going to the cave with the group. You can come later."

"Nora's going to be there." She smirked.

Chapter 4 - The meet-up

James arrived and greeted the group.

“You pumped?” Eric excitedly asked.

“Yeah. Totally. So pumped.” James responded, rolling his eyes.

“Hey, what’s up with you today? You seem a little off.” Eric asked, concerned.

“I’m just tired.”

“Okay, well then. May, we’re leaving now right?” Eric looked at May “Let’s go!”

Eric sprints off, James running after him.

“Hey wait up!” Nora yelled and ran with them.

“They sure do look excited. Guys, we should leave too.” May said.

May, Martha and Michael quickly finished packing up and followed the other three.

Chapter 5 - The Not-so-Grand Entrance

“Okay, we’re here. Guys, we know the plan right? We’ll enter the cave together. James and Nora will head up first, then Eric and Martha, and Michael and I will tag along. If anything happens, make sure to alarm us instantly.” May stated.

“Understood.” the group said simultaneously.

They open the doors to the cave.

Nora touches the walls and instantly pulls her hand back.

Wow, this is a mysterious cave. The walls are dusty yet kind of moist? This is eerie.

“Nora, let’s go up a floor.” James said as they walked up the stairs.

Nora and James strolled around, observing the symbols on the walls. They kept on coughing because of the amount of dust inside.

They finally made their way up to the top.

James looks around and notices an odd-shaped rock on the ground.

Wait, this is strange. Everything in this cave is full of painted sculptures, cave art... But why is there a rock here?! It’s not just any ordinary rock, either. This cave reminds me of that dream...

“Nora! Look at what I found.” He tapped Nora’s shoulder.

“What kind of rock is that? Why does it look so weird?” She asked, while picking up the rock. It emitted a faint blue glow around it.

“I don’t really know.” He responded, snatching the rock out of her hands. The rock itself was a shiny black colour, it felt cold yet warm. It felt hard, at the same time squishy.

Then it hit James. Nora was at the other end, looking for other rocks.

“NORA WE HAVE TO GO NOW!” James shouted, as he ran to Nora and grabbed her arm.

“Wait, what are you doing?!” She panicked, tripping over.

They ran as fast as they could back to the stairs, as the ground started to shake. James lost his grip and the stone slipped out of his hand.

Crap I dropped the stone, but my life is much more important than some damn rock.

A boulder crashed through the ceiling and blocked the stairs. James and Nora dropped to the ground from the pressure of the boulder, as Nora clenched onto James' arm.

Suddenly, a black slimy portal in front of them opened, and they saw a figure, wearing a cowboy hat, coming out of it.

"James James James, what is going on?!" Nora whispered, horrified.

Her eyes widened as she turned her head to look at James, where his brows knitted.

Wait. NO. This can't be happening. Don't tell me that is Tyler. It looks like him. Why is he wearing a cowboy hat? James thought.

The portal closed and the figure stood there, staring at the both of them.

"Who are you?!" Nora yelled.

The figure did not respond but looked at James.

James started to panic. His pupils were dilated. Cold sweat dripped down his face. He started to shake uncontrollably.

"Tyler?" He mumbled as he looked up at the figure.

The figure slowly took off his hat covering his face.

Chapter 6 - The Big Reveal

"Tyler! You're alive! I can't believe it!" James ran over to hug Tyler.

"I haven't been hugged in years." Tyler said.

"I'm just so glad you're alive. I missed you so much, man." James exclaimed, crying.

"You have lovely skin. Can't wait until it's mine."

James pulled back.

"Tyler, what? You're making me anxious.."

"I know what you did."

"Tyler? I thought-"

Then James remembered. 4 years ago, Tyler had a girlfriend, who was Nora. James got extremely jealous of their relationship, and killed Tyler during a party, poisoning his drink. Nora and James have been in a relationship since then.

"Oh, James. You know I'm not real, don't you? You know what you did."

"Tyler, I can explain."

"No, you can't. That's it. This is the end for you, my guy."

"B-but that's not fair! I did what I had to! You and Nora's relationship wasn't worth it anyway."

"But did you ever stop to think about how *I* feel? James?"

James turned around. Nora was missing.

The sun started to set, and it became dark.

Chapter 7 - Payback

“You son of a bit-” I tried to scream at Tyler.

His huge fist smashed into my face before I could finish. My face got whipped to the side and my head hit the ground.

“DO NOT CALL MY MOTHER A FEMALE DOG!” Tyler bellowed at me in vexation.

I was overwhelmed with guilt and fear. I didn’t know what to do.

Where was Nora? What did Tyler do with her?

“Where the hell is she?!” I yelled.

He rubbed his hands together and let out a sinister laugh.

“This is your fault, James.”

I looked up to the side, to see Nora on the mountain, trying to run away.

Suddenly, another black slimy portal appeared. It was Nora standing in front of it. I looked back up to see her on the mountain and a black slimy portal in front of her. I looked back, to see that she got startled, tripped and fell inside, face flat. That looked like it must’ve hurt.

Tyler walked toward Nora.

“Aww, it’s Nora. I’ve missed your sweet little face.” Grinning, he crouched down, making eye contact with Nora, holding her chin up.

“James! Help! My hands!” she cried, looking at me.

I looked at her hands, then her feet. She had been chained by this black slimy disgusting substance, like the one I had seen in my dream.

“Let’s help you get up, shall we?” Tyler said, smirking at Nora.

“Get your hands off of me! How are you even alive, Tyler?!” she snapped.

I closed my eyes. I couldn’t deal with this.

“Haha! Look at you two. This is amusing.” his annoying voice sounded.

“Nora, I’m sorry. This is all my fault.”

“Okay, cut the rubbish guys!” he articulated evilly, as he took out a rusty sharp knife and admired it for a minute.

I was on my knees, palms-on face. I felt so weak.

“Look at what I got for you, Nora. This is what he’s getting, for killing and betraying his best friend...just so that he could ruin our relationship!” he screeched.

As those words left his lips, I felt my heart sting. I gulped. No one said a word. I looked to the side to see Nora staring at me in disbelief, the tears pouring out of her eyes, dripping down to the cold ground as she wailed from emotional agony.

“You’re such a horrible person, James. I can’t believe it was you who did this.” she hissed with rage as her face turned red.

Tyler laughed, as he looked at me.

“James. You see this knife right here?” He pointed to his neck. “That’s what’s about to happen.”

He started to walk closer to me, as I looked up at him.

I felt sick to my stomach. He definitely wasn’t joking.

Nora began shaking her head, with a fearful expression. I could see her tear-filled red eyes, knowing what was about to happen. She seemed so hurt. I felt like my insides were being twisted.

She looked at me with a face I had never seen before. Frightened yet livid.

He crouched down to me, face to face.

The setting was quiet. I could hear my heart racing.

Tyler lifted up the knife up to my neck, then trailed it lightly down to my chest where my heart was, as I maintained eye contact.

“I’m sorry.” I whimpered, as sad tears started to drip down my already soaked face.

“Let’s make this equal, James. Goodbye.”

As I looked down at the knife, he forcefully shoved it into my chest. I felt the impact of it. Then I felt an intense tingle. The hormones and pain started to kick in. I panicked and sensed a burning, searing pain from the adrenaline. Then I felt the heat. It was a heat like nothing I ever imagined. I couldn’t hear anything, except for Nora’s muffled cries, then high pitched ringing. My vision started to get blurry. I couldn’t smell anything. I was numb everywhere. Then I felt every muscle in my body tense up, as I let out a huge, tormenting scream, and fell to the ground. I couldn’t feel anything anymore, and everything started to fade away, slowly and painfully.

Chapter 8 - Sleepover

4 years later

“The basement is actually a pretty nice place to chill at, guys,” Martha said.

“I agree. Guys, remember James and Nora? I kinda miss them. That day was horrible.” Eric replied.

“At least we made it out alive. We were about to get crushed. That cave is cursed. It was like we invaded someone’s home.” May added.

“The past few days I’ve been feeling strange, it felt like there was this presence wherever I went. I could never distinguish what it was though.” She looked at them. “Do you guys ever get that?” Martha asked.

“Haha, maybe it was Nora’s ghost! Perhaps it has got to do with that odd necklace of hers that we successfully sold for 20,000 dollars! So worth it though,” Michael laughed.

“I wouldn’t say “we”, Michael. I feel guilty about it though. And I’m still bummed over her death. Not James’ though. He deserved that after we found out what he did.” Martha interrupted.

“Well, who cares? Nora’s dead. What can she do? Rise from the dead to retrieve that necklace?” Michael scoffed.

“Well, she told us that necklace was special. It’s not some ordinary necklace. I remember she said she got it from a friend who found it from that cave.” May remarked.

“We can’t do anything about it now. I feel like that decision was quite wrong. Anyways goodnight!” Eric stated.

They all stopped talking and drifted off to sleep.

~

At some point around 3 am, I woke up to the same old sensation of someone staring at me up close. I didn't think much of it, as James' used to do this all the time.

My first instinct was to yell at first, but with years of experience of James' waking me up in this way, it took the threat away.

But then I recalled. James was dead.

Then I heard the sound of someone sobbing. I wanted to get up and check, but I was way too paranoid so I ignored it by hiding under the covers.

Chapter 9 - Coincidence? I think not

The sun had risen, as Martha opened her eyes. She looked around to see that everyone had gone to breakfast except for Michael.

Strange. Michael is usually the one who gets up first.

She walked up the stairs and sat down with her bowl of soup.

"Hi, May." Martha said.

"Martha! I'm so glad to see you're okay."

"What? I *am* okay."

Martha paused for a moment and remembered.

"Last night.. I heard someone sobbing-"

"That was me." May blurted out.

"Oh, what a relief!" Martha replied.

"I-I was crying.. Because I saw a figure of a woman wearing a cowboy hat staring at you, Martha."

Suddenly, a loud, piercing, blood-curdling cry sounded.

It came from the basement.

War Diary

Carmel School – Elsa High School, Elbaz, Elya – 14

“A grotto in a far place, dark yet illuminated, small yet big, lonely yet welcoming, and ancient yet magical. When demanded, I shall arrive, for passion and true heart, for despair and delight, for chagrin and fright.”

January 28th, 1941:

I had an hour to get home, if I did not make it, I would irritate my parents very much. I drove inside of my car, it is low-cost. My parents waited for me inside my house, I promised I would not be tardy. As the automobile was driving, I could not stop to admire the magnificent sight.

Today was an appealing day, the gracious sun rose on the comely shore, clouds acquired the luminous sky. The sky ran out of stars, so it gave in to the sunlight. Lake reflections shone like diamonds. Ocean waves were released on the seashore before leaving and returning anew.

Today was a significant day, I went to work from the morning to the night. I perceive work as a tough punishment that I am obligated to go to each long day. I am just a middle-class worker, an uncomplicated and simple young man of few talents, a man who writes poetry for fun, and whose dream has always been to publish a book. Reading is something that I have always appreciated. Principally, ancient Chinese tales. Specifically, one about a cave. Mogao Grottoes, the legend says. “A grotto in a far place, dark yet illuminated, small yet big, lonely yet welcoming, and ancient yet magical. When demanded, I shall arrive, for passion and true heart, for despair and delight, for chagrin and fright.” It is supposed to be magical and there when it is a necessity. It will grant your wishes, and take you on an unimaginable and extraordinary journey. My dreams only can tell you how much I have dreamed about this supernatural and mystic cave.

As I got home from work to my irritated mother and father, I found a letter, the letter, the letter of my life. The letter of a man’s life. It was from the war department sent by Sergeant Henry Scott, who is a friend of mine.

“Dear Sir Chan:

A check of “War Department of China” indicates that you can meet the qualifications required for appointment as new Major General (1st Lt.). In the Army of China. Enclosed are application blanks leading to appointment as Major General in the Army of China. You should complete in every detail the forms 0850 and 0850a and forward them directly to the service command general, Headquarters, 9th service command, Service of Supply, Tang Erik, Beijing.

Additional information relative to your appointment will be furnished by the Service Command General. Should you desire to communicate with him directly, regarding any question, we suggest that you do so.

We look forward to fighting by your side.

For the new Chief Commandant:

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read "J. L. Davis", with a long, sweeping underline.

I am going to war as a chief, the fear is enormous, yet the satisfaction is greater and the fulfillment outweighs the fright. I would now prove to all of my friends and judging parents that I could honor all and return victorious as the valiant wind. Undeniably, I am going to miss Lillian, the love of my life. We met when I was 23 and have been together ever since. I am now 27 and after 4 years together, she finally became my soon-to-be wife. We met under a bridge, stars were enlightening her skin, the moonlight was protecting her from this fierce life.

I decided to document my journey to war as a simple man, Sergeant Chan, Mathew. And though it is a basic and short war, I will make the best of it and make everyone proud.

February 11th, 1941:

I had two weeks to say goodbye and pack my bag. With me are a water bottle, basic necessities, a photo of my precious Lillian, and of course, you, my dear journal. Unfortunately, I have not gotten the chance to write to you lately, in view of the fact that the last few weeks have been tremendously occupied. I have to leave tomorrow, and the past few days, I ultimately realized that it was concluding, I am actually leaving. My brain is not too sure if this is the right choice, but my heart knows that this is the only possible choice to honor my parents, and this is the chance of a lifetime to prove myself.

Worrying was tough to fight, it consistently took over. Will I be an exemplary general? Will I make it past the first day? Will my beloved relatives still think about me? Will I ever return?...

February 13th, 1941:

I took a big step to leave my beautiful house, I marched down the stairway and as I gazed outside, it was still the night. I took a deep breath and stared at the angelic moonlight. The air got inside of my salubrious lungs. I wandered in the dark for a few minutes, the last few minutes to myself. My cold bones felt a rush of exhilaration. I took great pleasure in this last instant and wished for it to last perpetually. Stars and constellations enlightened my beautiful house.

I just arrived at our new base, where I am writing from and I have not got much time to write. Training will occupy me plenty during our first few weeks. I demanded training, to be ready in the future. And for the tragic moments coming soon at war.

March 15rst, 1941:

My first month here spent in training and preparation has been filled with pain and suffering. My endurance was required night and day. At no time had I ever imagined that I would feel this quantity of pain. Under no circumstances did I get a chance to write to you, my dear journal. Men here are very tough, sturdy, and resilient, thus, they would not understand writing in a journal. They would certainly not understand the effect of poetry itself.

We are entering the war next week, entering it in fright, in trepidation, and in disgust. Death, injuries, shooting, scarring moments, horrific memories, loss of men, all of those appalling things are going to be dealt with in the future and are waiting ahead of us. War is a celebration of despair and grief, that is the way I see it. The fright is such that even the sturdiest men in the world enter war immensely timorous. The feeling is such that it is not explainable.

May 20th, 1941:

I did not mean to kill him...

During the battle, several days ago, I committed the ultimate act. I killed my closest friend, my confidant, my companion. My fingers pressed on my weapon slowly, as he was standing near... Death took possession of the battlefield, and guilt took possession of my mind and heart. My hand was shaking in fear.

It has now been two months since we entered the battle. Nonetheless, enemies tend to be tougher to defeat. War is tremendous, violent, and petrifying. As time goes by, soldiers become more vigorous. It feels like months have passed since we entered this combat. Thus far, I have been overwhelmed by fatigue, guiding me to fragility. War is bloodshed, daily, I wake up to screams of agony, torture, labor. That is if we are able to get some sleep, needless to say. We experience heart-pounding, and fear itself. One might say that fighters shall not be scared during combat. These myths are strongly mistaken. A warrior ought to feel pain, grief, and more.

However, I do feel stronger overall, I have observed it in my behavior. As a chief commandant here, I have gained respect from others. I feel safer on the battlefield, blood on my hands, blood on my shirt, blood on my weapons. War has made me take lives away. At first, I was out-distanced by fright and terror. Yet, now, the time has forced me in-attention to such things. "Fire! Kill him over there! Shoot!" I scream daily. War has had a real impact on me, some say it turned me into the finest soldier and leader. Some say it made me tougher, and tougher to defeat. In spite of that, I could observe real changes, in my cognitive behavior, and actions, it has me functioning and reacting differently. Perhaps, those "power corrupts" myths are true.

We have nothing to shower and clean, we ought to think creatively and find elements to get clean habitually. We cannot take too many things with us as we have to change base customarily, as our enemies have discovered and invaded our base several times. Panic repeatedly takes over at this time. Regardless of those actions, I caught sight of my personality changes, I have made new friends.

War habits are the greatest part of my experience here. In particular, the songs we sing. Each night, before sleeping for an hour, we sing great songs for several friendly minutes. Friendliness was created during this time.

War has impacted me, nevertheless, I additionally have impacted the war. I have killed several people on this dirty and deadly ground. By turning stress, and anxiety into kills and fury. Sanitary conditions ought to be tough, yet superior to other places.

I wrote a letter to Lillian, she has not responded yet. Neither has she sent anything. The situation makes me worry plenty.

July 25th, 1942:

I just found this diary in my bag, the despair it had brought me to discover this chronicle after such a long-lasting period of time. Time took me far from you my dear journal.

As I arose on the forenoon to the sound, and call of ultimate death. I perused through the letters that I had received from my adored parents. I marched downstairs to our temporary settlement, only to see laughing soldiers. This day was particularly noteworthy, it is my birthday. Terror had overtaken time, it was unthinkable to practice the concept of time. I fought, and directed the warriors night and day, for long hours. Survival was immensely tough, tolerance and suffering were highly demanded. Combatants fought for what was left of their cherished lives. Such battles make you reconsider the concept of human life. Such conflicts demand valiant and brave soldiers to abstract lives away.

I seized combatants glancing at me. Impulsion took over my entire body. As the combatants retreated, I discovered sorrowful information. Lillian had committed the ultimate act of replacement. She had sent an artist's impression to her brother, who was an ally of mine. Lillian and her new lover were present in this painting, Lillian was in the wet rain, her hair in the cold wind. I suppose it is coherent and logical given the knowledge that I had been gone for over a year, and she had not sent a letter. Yet, my heart desired, and hoped that she had not forgotten about me, hoped she would put a name to our love.

Lillian, if you were to ever see this, I heard you found a new lover. And, who in the name of the sky, could blame you. I have not heard from you in over a year yet my heart is unable to stop thinking about you. Although I realize that I ought to forget about you and believe me, I attempted to, I am incapable of it. Just know I want you to be happy, and content. I wish for your heart to go on, despite the fact that it means without me. Due to all these reasons, I wrote you a poem.

*I am jealous of the rain that falls upon the skin
I am jealous of the wind that ripples through your hair
It's closer than your shadow.
I always thought I would come back,
It is hard for me to say,
I am jealous of the way you must be happy without me*

*I am jealous of the night and days I don't spend with you
I am jealous of the love, the love that was in here
Gone for somebody else to share.*

*As a sink in the sand, watch you slip through my hands
Because all I do is cry behind these machine guns,
I wished you the best that all this world could give,
Nevertheless, that was not with me.*

*I might die here,
All I wish is for you to be happy with your new peer.*

April 21st, 1943:

"Fire!" I screamed this morning. I was running, the battlefield was mine. I have turned into a fearless beast incapable of feeling anything anymore. My relatives would not recognize me. War seems to be nearly finished.

I started to feel the world turning slowly around me, I felt light and free. I heard a high-pitched noise for a few minutes. My head became light, and I felt myself slowly fading away. The universe suddenly became black. I looked up, but only saw frozen clouds slowly disappearing. As my head got back to normal slowly, I opened my eyes and looked around me. Blood, blood was everywhere. Blood, on my hands, blood on my shirt, blood on my legs. The pain started coming through, and I fell onto the hard floor. There I was on the dirty floor, lying in my own blood. I was and still am extremely tired, mentally, physically, psychologically. I soon comprehended that I was injured. I got up, with a slight rush of adrenaline. And walked slowly, yet painfully, to the nearest place. The infirmary and the clinics were too far. I walked around desperately, hoping to find someone, about to get lost in my own despair. I would never have imagined that anything of the sort could have occurred to a man such as myself. Before I perceived where I was, I was already far far away.

I sat down on the floor in an odd place, far from the battlefield, a dozen minutes had already passed. At this moment, I understood I had forgotten to take off the chronicle from my coat's pocket, at least, I would be able to write to you. I let out a tear, a tear representing the stress, representing pressure, pain, and my broken heart, the first tear I had let out in a year. I felt like myself again, it is sad I had to lose myself. What had warfare done to me? As the tear dropped down my bloody face. At this moment, a giant rock behind me moved steadily and opened. I lost balance slightly, causing me to fall. As I got up, I saw an immense cave, covered with wonders. With no hesitation, I knew where I was. As I entered the famous cave and stepped inside, I remember smiling.

I walked inside, there was a hallway, it was very long and dark. It seemed as if the hallway would last forever and never end. While I was slowly walking, I could see ancient paintings on the walls, and light music was playing in the background. I stopped feeling pain for a few moments. Or maybe, my brain was just in shock. The bleeding had stopped, although I had been shot only about 15 minutes before encountering this cave. As the hallway came to an end, there was a gigantic room. An immense room was waiting for me. It contained some sort of moving images in color, similar to the new invention, the television. The images looked very real. It was strange drawings of people and of our world, it seems. I could see people, living their normal lives. In the room were lakes, diamonds, gold, it was beautiful. The loud silence took over. Lakes were as pure as a baby's soul. Fruit trees seemed as sweet as honey. This grotto is mystical. It is beyond belief. I wish that moment would last endlessly.

April 21st, 1943

I feel myself fading away, slowly. I feel myself fading away in the wind, to a peaceful sound. I wonder if people noticed I was gone. I keep fighting on, fighting for my life, but I am not going to be able to survive for long. Fear and pain have already taken over my body, although my brain is afraid, my heart and I feel at ease. At ease, being here, living my dream. Pain is immense, it is all I can think about. It has taken over, and stops me from moving. If I were to perish, I would preferably do it here.

As I was on the ground struggling to keep my eyes open, I heard a sound or rather, a voice. I recognized that voice, it was so familiar. It was Lillian's voice, telling me: "It is all going to be okay".

May 12th, 1980.

Johnny Li is the name I go by. I have recently discovered that Roby Li, the man who I lived with, is not my biological father. However, my mother, Lillian, has given some clues before she passed away of who my father was. After reading this, I ultimately understood who he is, in certain terms. The airbase of Santa Monica just discovered this memoir, inside of a cave if you understand what I mean. This is very emotional and full of poems and declarations of love. And, as soon as I started reading the first few sentences, I knew who my father was. I have to admit, I let out a tear while reading this.

All my life, I have missed my biological father during my whole 39 years of life, and I wondered who he was. After reading this heartwarming, and truly devastating diary, I felt honored to have this man as a father. Although, I never got a chance to meet him. Although, he might never have known he had a son. Although, my mother married another man. Nonetheless, this shows the drastic effect that war has on soldiers as people. And my father died as a proud man, who served his country. And he deserves all the pride in the world for that.

Why do Men Greed for Gold?

Carmel School – Elsa High School, Lyons, Itai – 15

I sit on a small rock overlooking the bridge leading to the fortress. Ten goblins holding spears and shields pace around on the bridge. If I were to attack this place I would have to kill them.

“You don’t plan on attacking this place on your own do you?” A familiar but still mysterious and gruff voice says.

I immediately think that it is Dorug talking to me.

“Dorug?” I ask as I turn around to look at the man behind me. He is an old knight with three scars going down his face, his once shiny armor is blackened and scratched and has no remnants of the black and yellow that I had seen on some other knights.

“No. I am Aodh, leader of these riders. I have come to assist you on your conquest for the treasure” Aodh replies as he gestures behind him to a group of five or more riders on horseback with bows slung over their backs, they are all of average height and wear helmets over the faces, their armor is shiny clean and a reddish black dragon has been stitched on over their armor.

I walk over to them and look at them, astounded that this group of eight riders would be assisting me with my attack on the goblin fortress.

“What is the plan? How are we going to attack his place?” Aodh asks.

“There seems to be only one entrance, the drawbridge, just over there. My friend is out looking for another entrance.” I answer.

Eldoron arrives at that moment and says to the knight as he arrives then he turns to me and continues, “The only entrance is the draw bridge that lies just over this ridge. There is a moat around it and ten goblins on it. We will have to kill them before we can enter.”

“Okay, Aodh can your men use your arrows to kill the goblins on the bridge? If they see that they are under attack they will close the bridge so we will have to act fast.” I say slowly, “Everyone clear?”

“Yes. Men get up on that ridge and aim. Make sure no one aims for the same man and wait for my command.” Aodh says to his knights.

“Okay!” The knights all say, as they pull their bows off of their backs. The men get off of their horses and tether them to some trees. Then they walk slowly onto the ridge and kneel down and exchange some words, probably telling each other who to aim for.

Eldoron turns and walks back down a steep path leading to the bridge below. He stops behind a boulder and I follow him and stop behind the boulder as well. Aodh follows us and rests behind a rock to the right of the bridge.

“Are we ready?” Aodh asks.

I look over the boulder and at the bridge. The ten green goblins walk around lazily around the stone bridge. I look back at Aodh and I nod. I pull out my bow and aim and Aodh does the same. Aodh puts his bow down and raises his and then swiftly throws it to the floor and picks up his bow and fires along with the rest of us. The arrows arch over, through the air and strike the enemies on the bridge. All ten of them fall down to the ground immediately.

Eldoron gets up first and walks silently over to the bridge, I follow with Aodh close behind. We walk onto the bridge and past the bodies of the dead goblins. Suddenly the door of the fort bursts open and a short green goblin

staggers out. We all share looks with each other about what to do, we have no time to aim and reload our bows and we cannot get to him fast enough.

Eldoron charges towards the goblin as the goblin looks up at and screams. The goblin turns around and runs back into the fortress. The door slams behind him and the drawbridge begins to raise. Aodh, Eldoron and I sprint over to the bridge as it is raising and jump onto it, the other knights don't have time to get onto the bridge. The bridge is halfway raised when we land and we slide across the splintery wood and onto the small stone platform that rests before the door that the goblin went through. The bridge closes behind us.

I am helped up off the floor by Eldoron who then helps Aodh as well. I look around and see that we are in a small room with torches lit on either side. The roof is arched from the side and the wall behind us is the draw bridge. To the front of us is the door that the goblin went through.

"Everyone okay?" Eldoron asks.

"Yes." I reply, while Aodh nods.

"Good, let's go through the door. Get your swords ready, the enemies will be through this door." Eldoron says as he pulls his sword out of his scabbard. Aodh and I do the same.

I walk the short paces over to the door and attempt to push it open but it doesn't budge.

"Help me with the door." I say to the others.

Eldoron and Aodh walk over to me and we slam our bodies into the wooden door. The door splinters and breaks snapping into multiple pieces. We walk through the doorway with our swords drawn, a group of four smaller goblins await us on the other side. Their green flesh shines in the light of the torches nearby. Almost immediately they charge at us.

The first one to reach us swings his sharpened sword into Eldoron's sword and the thin blade breaks cleanly. He looks around in shock but is quickly stopped from running as he is stabbed by Eldoron's swinging blade.

Another one runs to me but is stabbed through the head by Aodh as he charges. The goblin falls to the floor with the blade still stuck through his head. Aodh kneels down and attempts to pull the sword back out but before he can another small goblin charges at him. I run in front of Aodh and block the goblins' attacks. His blade hits mine and rebounds, he quickly regains and attacks again, this time knocking my sword from my hand and onto the cobblestone floor.

He attempts to attack again but is stabbed through the chest by Aodh, who now has his bloodied sword back. Eldoron is still fighting the first goblin when the final goblin charges at Eldoron. I seem to be the only one that sees it and I act immediately, charging towards the enemy without a weapon. I throw my body into his knocking him onto the floor.

We roll onto the floor, the goblin's sword lays on the ground in between us, we both charge for it but I get it faster. I pull the sword up and roll onto my back thrusting the sword up towards the air. My actions are too fast and the goblin is already mid jump when he lands on the sword's blade. His body crushes on top of me, I let go of the sword and push his body off of me.

Eldoron walks over and puts his arm out for me to hold, I do and he pulls me off the cold and bloody stone floor. "Thanks." Eldoron says.

"No problem." I respond, I look around the room and see that there are two staircases, one leading up and the other leading down to the belly of the fortress, "Let's split up, I'll go downstairs, you two go up, look for Dorug."

Eldoron and Aodh nod then proceed up the stairs. I continue to look around the room and am able to see that I am in a circular tower. Stone arches come out of the walls and meet in the middle of the ceiling in the middle of the circular room. The stairs leading up and down to the other parts of the fortress ascend in a spiral.

I walk over to the goblin that had jumped on me and flip him over, as I do I can hear the clang of metal as my blade hits the stone floor. I attempt to pull the sword out of the goblin but it doesn't budge so I walk over to another of the dead goblins and pick up a small sword that lay by it's bloodied corpse.

I walk over to the wall and begin my descent down the spiral staircase. I walk for about two minutes down the stairs before I reach the bottom, I wouldn't be able to see if not for the torches that rest on the side of the walls. I look ahead and see that I am once in a cave system. Could these be the caves I was looking for?

I can hear water dripping up ahead, the splish splash of water echoes through the cave and repeatedly reaches my ears. I look back at the stairs once more before I continue through the tunnel. I walk for a while before I reach another tunnel with two doors on either of the sides.

Carefully I look through each of the doors, making sure that no enemies lay inside waiting for me. The first one is empty, except for a few barrels of bread. But the second one was amazing. A huge room, further than the eye could see, full of gold and jewels. Suits of armor as glamorous as ever lay strewn on the floor like day old garbage. Swords and other weapons that were encrusted with gems lay everywhere. The mountains of gold and silver coins and bars reached to the ceiling over thirty feet tall.

Huge columns reached for the heavens and touched the sky. And along the walls were tapestries unlike anything I had ever seen before, depicting the days of old and battles of long ago. Books lay everywhere as well, their covers made out of the finest leather and also encrusted with gems and gold.

I walk through the piles of gold and gems, awing at them. Occasionally tripping on armor that lay on the ground, but I didn't mind, I was starstruck by the treasure that lay forgotten in these caves. Obviously the goblins had not cared for it, huge cobwebs lined the ceiling and some of the mountains of gold. The columns that hold up the roof, placed everywhere ten meters from each other and created a magnificent surrounding for the treasure, were in a state of destruction, some lay ruin on the floor of the hall, others had huge cracks in them or holes.

Greed over takes me and I sit on the ground shoving huge piles of gold into my bag. After a while of sitting and shoving gold I continue to walk until I can see the end of the hall. Here too huge mountains of gold reach for the sky and at the end a small table lay with a sword on top.

I walk towards the table, a single ray of light shines from a hole in the ceiling and onto the sword. As I walk closer I can see that the sword is reflecting light from the sun in the shape of scenes from a battle along the nearby walls of the hall. I stop as the intensity of the light changes and the scene does too.

Bright men now on horses crash into each other, locked in battle some of the men fall down are crushed by the hooves of the other horses and then suddenly the shapes disappear and are replaced by snakes that glow brightly and slither across the walls slowly.

Then the lights disappear, the walls are blank again, except for the tapestries, gold and treasure. I walk over and pick up the sword. It has a silver rectangular cross guard and silver spherical hilt with a dragon engraved on the blade, just like my master had said. But what he didn't mention is that the golden dragons dance along the blade spewing out fire and destroying lands in their own world. I run my hand along the blade feeling the dragons but it is just metal.

I take one last look around the room of treasure before I walk out of the hall and back into the tunnels, the sword still clutched in my hands.

I look to my right, the way which I came and in the distance I can see a small group of people charging towards me. With my sword in my right hand, I run to my left. Away from the horde of men. But I am too slow, under the weight of the gold I have taken I cannot out run them. I turn around as the first one of the group reaches me, they come crashing into me and we fall to the floor.

"Eamonn?" a man laying next to me asks.

"Dorug, is that you?" I reply, but before I can get an answer two more men rush over and help me and Dorug up.

"No time for reuniting now! We have to run!" I hear Eldoron yell as he runs past me. I look up and see Aodh helping me up. I shrug my bag off and get up then run after the others, Aodh right behind me.

"Who is chasing us?" I yell after anyone who can hear me.

"Goblins! A whole army of them! They came right after we freed Dorug!" Eldoron screams back at me.

We continue running through the tunnels passing dozens of rooms full of gold and treasure and libraries full of wisdom, until finally we can see a light up ahead, where the tunnel ends. We put all of our effort into sprinting till the end. I am the first to reach the end of the tunnel, and to reach the ground outside but there is none.

At the end of the tunnel there is a cliff overlooking a canyon, to which it seems has no floor. As soon as I see this I try to stop myself but it is too late, I am about to fall when I feel a hand grab my shirt and pull me back. I fall backwards and land on the cold stone floor.

"It is a dead end! If we go this way we have to jump!" Aodh yells.

"What do we do?" Dorug screams.

"Climb out onto the wall of the canyon! If we stay here the goblins will kill us!" I yell.

The thunderous stampede of the goblin army is getting closer. The four of us clamber out onto the wall of the canyon. Rocks fall below us and we can hear the echo of them hitting the floor far below.

The stampede is getting closer, I can hear the goblins screaming orders to find us, hopefully they don't know that we are here.

"What if they start climbing out to chase us?" Dorug yells.

"We have to climb higher!" Eldoron screams of the sound of the goblin stampede.

But it is too late, the sound of the charging stampede has stopped and I can hear the grunts and snorts of the goblin army as they wonder where we went. Eldoron looks over to Dorug and I, as we cling to the wall next to each other and puts a finger over his mouth, then signals for us to move up.

We begin to climb again, silently up the canyon wall. The climbing is so as we have no gear and we have to be silent, but we fail. A single rock falls from Aodh's feet and he slips and falls, yelling until he hits the ground below. The goblins see this and with a few commands the first one begins to climb out of the tunnel and towards Dorug and I.

"Damn! We have to move!" Dorug yells.

"We can't go up. It is too difficult to climb! We have to fight!" Eldoron yells back and draws his sword. I do the same as we cling to the steep slope.

We turn around and face the tunnel opening. The first goblin reaches me and I kick him away, he tumbles and rolls off of the slope. Dorug pulls out an ax and throws it at another goblin who has just climbed out of the tunnel.

The blade of the ax lodges itself in the goblins skull, blood spurts out and the goblin also falls down to the bottom of the canyon. Out of the blue a sudden and loud rumbling noise fills the air.

“What is that?” I yell as Eldoron kicks a goblin away.

“It sounds like water rushing!” Dorug yells.

“I think it has!” I yell.

“The dam must have broken! Hold on to the wall!” Eldoron yells back as he stabs another goblin, who falls off the wall with Eldoron’s sword still stuck through its chest.

All of a sudden, the rumbling can be seen. A huge jet of water burst through the tunnel hole and dozens of goblins fall to the canyon floor, screaming along the way. The three of us take our knives and stab them into the rocky slope, hoping that they would hold us on if we didn’t let go.

More goblins begin to fall from above, they are probably trying to climb down into the canyon from above, hitting us as they fall. But we don’t waver. The water crashes down into us and continues to pour out of the tunnel until finally it stops.

Eldoron, Dorug and I clamber carefully back into the tunnel, sopping wet. The water drips down and hits the wet floor below. The tunnel is now empty, and below we can see the bodies of dozens and dozens of goblins. Aodh is nowhere to be seen. But we found the treasure. We mourn our loss but then celebrate the treasure we have found. But as of now we will return to our villages as rich men.

The Resurrection

Carmel School – Elsa High School, Wigisser, Alex – 14

The dark opening near a cliff attracts life in. Entering the threshold of darkness, fear settles as the daunting darkness, expanse, and silence of the cave scares. Persevering forward, the wynorrific cave reveals its earthy smells and textured walls, the fear of the cave was all but a masquerade of freedom. The drug of being the first in, discovering previous artifacts by our brave ancestors who sought to create murals of their knowledge deep in the dangers of the caves is unmatched. Though caves provide the freedom humans desire, oftentimes caves are overseen once people are comforted with the jeopardy of caves, attracted by the trail of breadcrumbs wanting to fully be satisfied with a discovery; flooding, hypothermia, falling rocks, etc. Do not balance with the dangers of curiosity. But it's the risk that cunningly allows spelunkers to test fate.

I was once an acclaimed teenage spelunker, I discovered multiple portals of darkness. Now I am a man with a loss of passion and cowardly behavior. Slowly falling into my cave. I have tested fate with the consciousness of the dangers of curiosity. However, on the expedition of Egypt's blue hole, I was blinded by my ego and pride which set off my undoing. I did not test my fate but my companion Hugo, his pace was decreasing, signaling a metallic taste in the tank the cave was getting slimmer. The pessimistic voice I shut many years ago began to build anxiousness in the slim cave 120 meters underwater. I was unable to provide him with the oxygen he desperately needed. I saw the life in him slowly vanish. Before the bubbles stopped he used his last breath to grip my BCD and inflated it to reach the surface before I could see him vividly for the last time. As I ascended from the depths of the Red sea, Hugo became homogenous to the dark blue sea, all was gloomy. Nothing but a ringing sound in my ear and thoughts of Hugo flooded my mind, ignoring the press I attempted to utilize my last few breaths to rescue Hugo, however, death had already captured him, his lifeless body would never be found due to the overwhelming current, he now belonged to the sea. Unable to hear, the press crowded me asking and flashing cameras in my face, eagerly trying to plaster me on the front page of their newspapers. I was now the villain amongst the world. They repeated lies of the expedition claiming I was an envious murderer and it soon became the accepted truth. Coping with alcohol and partying, I solidified myself as a coward, I no longer was the people's hero but the people's villain.

Now the world's antagonist, I live far from civilization, alone. From the smells of the displeasing but nostalgic stale air of the caves to the smell of alcohol in my trailer home, what have I become? Days on, not being able to differentiate day and night I sit by the radio on my stained couch listening to the mutter of the music, hardly ever seeing people. Life has beaten me, I can no longer bear the sight of my confined home, to what extent could this go on for? No friends, no family, no pets, nothing at all, I must throw in the towel eventually. Every night I drown myself in alcohol in an attempt to equal with my sins. As I begin to lose consciousness the unstable structure of the trailer house shakes vigorously. I awake believing I have been found by the IRS, ready to take me to prison after my reneged promises in a sea of debt. Scrambling across the trailer to collect the money I have left, I plan to flee somewhere farther from civilization. The man rushed into my trailer, speechless, I choked on my excuses feeling as though I'm on the floor of the red sea in Egypt once more. The man intrudes himself into the trailer, introducing himself as Mr. Dawber. The smell of cologne fills the room overwhelming the common scent of alcohol. His name suited his face and clothes almost identical to a character of the matrix. Mr. Dawber is reactionless, an apathetic man, an identical resemblance to an agent of the matrix. As I swiftly get up I ask him for "the purpose of this unforeseen visit." Mr. Dawber, unintimidated by the bottle I hold in my hand approaches me, stating that he is able to 'cease' the ending to my undoing by paying all of my debt in one condition. The condition being I was to collect hidden artifacts of the Mogao grottoes to be sold at heritage auctioneers, notorious for auctioning stolen artifacts. My eyes pop, mouth drops, skin turns white, my misery to an end? This appealing deal is a breach of my moral code. Though the troubles of life would stop chasing me, the breach of my principles will certainly scar and rot me to my dying day. Impulsivity, I accept, what morals do I hold after the death of Hugo? The only way from rock bottom is up, right? I hesitantly leave my trailer, almost forgetting how to walk and being directly pierced in the eye by the sun, I was momentarily blinded. Finally leaving my cave I became comforted and fond of, it was time for me to enter and endeavor a new cave.

Anxiety fills my body as I approach the airport, wanting to be shadowed by the tinted windows I no longer can backtrack. Realizing I don't have a passport, I mention this to Mr. Dawber, however, there is no response. Being grabbed by the shirt I am thrown out of the car, I adjust to the lighting, feeling a large flurry of wind nearly knocking my limp body over. I can barely hear my thoughts. I complained that I was illegally boarding this commercial plane. Catching my balance a heavy bag is thrown onto me, comprehending it is my equipment, such as rock climbing, I am reminded of the harsh backaches I was once accustomed to. I look forward to the plane and remind myself of the future I must now face regardless of anything and now must appear out of the shadows. Though I am not ready to confront this new period, the show must go on. Boarding the plane, it's at full capacity, I walk down the aisle feeling as the aisle stretches, taunting me to shamefully walk through. Puzzled, I no longer am anxious about the plane as no one can recognize me, was it this simple? Could I have just re-entered society like this? Sitting down I experience the withdrawal of alcohol. Panic enters, ignoring all safety procedures shown in the short video I rush to the galley of the plane to secure alcohol, after tasting the bitterness of alcohol the dopamine relaxes my fearsome body as I lose control of my body then consciousness, once again cowardly escaping the reality of my life.

A blink of an eye later, I had arrived at the Mogao Grottoes, disguised as a tourist. I was to study the caves. The admirable rock-cut traditional architectural structure felt as if it was standing over me. It was the oasis of the desert, almost an illusion. The integrity represented by the persistence of the creation of this shrine spoke to the young optimistic voice in me. Realizing that this expedition was far beyond paying my debt, but resurrecting the optimistic man that once ruled my body. However, knowing that I am timid and fearful of this, I neglect this feeling as this optimistic man that brought me prosperity also brought me into my spiral, I am not prepared for such a change. The bright sunlight at the cave's entrance diminishes as the tour group enters into darkness. Entering the Grotto I stood in awe, enchanted by the vibrant colors of the relics and statues. Freedom, forgetting all the liabilities of life. Seeing the Buddhist statue's detailed color, smelling the residue of Chinese incense all was a nostalgic experience. As I began to lurk behind the tour group I entered different grottoes viewing all the paintings and hieroglyphics. A sense of empowerment and rejoice fills me, coughing, dust begins falling out of the ceiling, looking up the hieroglyphics begins spreading a crack is revealed. The crack centers me, as I reflect on the curiosity trap I had fallen into, I was clouded by optimism. Sprinting towards a slim opening, I am reminded of the reason I was set here, to retrieve relics. Marginally being able to fit in the opening, I leap my body over, barely getting collapsed by the falling boulders that have survived all. A burning sensation seeps through the pores of my skin, I've scraped a whole segment of my body, as I become fully aware of my surroundings. No space to grab my flask to disinfect my wound, my body pleads to give up as it signals my half flesh body. Persevering forward, the cave's slim knobby stone walls squeeze on my chest. My breaths get shorter as I press forward, my body collapses in itself choking on each breath, beams of light my hope! I heedlessly rush to the light on the other side. My wounds open pouring a trail of blood, painting the floor almost as vibrant as the grottoes murals themselves. My squeezed body can narrowly pass through the slim exit, stumbling to the ground, I instinctively pour the flask of alcohol over my wounds. The stinging sensation does not bother my adrenaline-filled body. Sitting on the floor, my hands burn in the frigid air I try blowing my warm breath, this grotto differs from other grottoes. This grotto has an essence of life, the incense, relics, hieroglyphics, and statues all fresher, all refurbished and nurtured. Murmurs of people begin to cloud my thinking. Slowly losing my vision, I best try to maintain consciousness. People in orange robes walk towards me saving me from my pain and despair. Was this my death? Faintly letting go I slip out of my consciousness.

Cold air fills my lungs, my blood pumping warm blood across my body, I feel myself regaining consciousness. Men in orange robes and bald heads walk towards me providing me with water. My wounds all healed, body warm, my head breathable, they've shaved my hair!? Frantically getting up, men, women, and children surround me, ready to fend for myself, I scream at them with my raspy voice. I grab a relic throwing it as a signal of defense, all stay calm, I've stumbled into a society of monks? Collecting the information they are not hostile towards me, an older monk stumbles towards me, hearing his wooden shaft all bow in respect to his entry. Structurally making way, all monks shuffle to the side remaining at a bowed position, I awkwardly am stood isolated from the rest. The old monk introduces himself as 'Fa Bo' the abbot of this monastery. He enjoins me to visit another segment of this grotto, as I stutter my words Fa Bo interrupts me stating that "All questions shall be answered." His tone was soothing and wise. His hands wrinkled and rough, suggesting his lifetime of aid and knowledge, respectfully with open ears, I listen as I comprehend their open arms for saving my life. Entering a different grotto a large buddha statue sits as the central piece of this grotto, this shrine was full of love and life, which differed from the one

brought by the tour guide. The colors were even more saturated, the hieroglyphics more concise. Fa Bo pays respect to the buddha slowly kneeling and palming his wrinkled hands he bows, I imitate his actions. Slowly rising from the deep bow he begins a series of explanations, "Firstly, I understand this peculiar event, no human nor animal has discovered the true population of the Mogao Grottoes, centuries of ancestors living in this library of knowledge has kept us in the sanctified grottos. All changed as the west was introduced to the grottoes, my ancestors strived and practiced generosity, however, cheating, abuse and constantly being overseen as humans forcefully pushed us back into the depths of the caves. We were seen as artifacts of prosperity rather than humans. I hold no bitterness, but disappointment in humanity, seeing you lying on the floors of our grottoes, counting each heartbeat until your death, obligated me to save you. A western man frightens me, however, living by the Buddha I radiate boundless love towards everyone." Finishing his monologue he suspiciously asks me for my purpose of visiting the grottoes. Hesitantly, I responded by mentioning that I was here as a tourist, as I did not want any grudge against Fa Bo. As both Fa Bo and I leave the Chaitya Grotto re-entering the focal grotto for the Monks, the ambiance of peace and joy is pacifying my anxiousness. Meeting everyone and apologizing, I forget all my debts and dues, whilst I immerse myself in this notable atmosphere, I wonder, how long will I be here? Considering the difficulty of getting in here, I prepare myself for life in the lost civilization of the Mogao grottoes.

Not counting each day I assume months had passed, the time has become negligible, I had found life in the caves being accepted into a community that attracts positivity. Meditation and healing, peace I found, accepting the death of Hugo being a natural part of existence, I cherish and celebrate his life rather than grieving and hindering his life for myself. Breathing the fresh air and blowing out the guilt, grief, neglect, and blame out. Now healthy, I am purified and cleansed from all my toxins and forgive myself for my wrongdoings. From poking the chopsticks into my food to mastering the chopsticks I have developed and become integrated and accepted by everyone. I am fascinated by them. It has been reciprocated back, telling everyone adventures and stories of my life. A functioning society with no bitterness, no inequality is a reflection of the 7 principles of Buddhism. Balance is what I now believe, though my life has been remade a sense of fault is lurking in me. Disease has spread among the civilization, coughs, sneezes, and fevers, their pure bodies innocent from the diseases of the world I had brought. Knowing this I must find a way to leave, the deep sky-gaping hole that provides food, light, and water for the monks to feed on will be my escape. The sinkhole so deep can be compared to a vertical tunnel Packing my bags I am ready to go, as all settle for rest, I speak to Fa Bo once more. Fa Bo is always the last to sleep, I find him staring up into the starry night illuminated by the long portal of life. Disturbing him I tell him with great sadness "I must leave, disease has been upon everyone I blame myself, thank you for the food, thank you for the water, thank you for my life, thank you for peace, I thank you for everything." I no longer am the man of the past, my hands sweat, eyes clouded by my tears I tell Fa Bo lastly in my wobbly voice, "I was here on an expedition, to take the relics of your people, I'd like to apologize for my doings, I now must leave out of my honor for what I've done." Fa Bo breaking a smile, "It's our people now, I've always known. Fate is unpredictable, we may doubt fate but it is in our hands the choices we make that can affect others. Taking that expedition was the best thing to happen to the Monks. For every bad thing, there is a good thing. All I ask from you is that you spread Buddhism and the civilization of the Mogao grottoes." Bowing, dust falls, Deja Vu, the hieroglyphics split rocks fall, the crack had broken into the grotto, instinctively I rush to wake everyone to notify them to rescue everyone from the collapsing cave. Rocks falling, several monks have been hit from the rain of rocks, those alive rush to the sinkhole, preparing to rescue monks out of the collapsing grotto everyone remembers as safe. Realizing this pursuit was impossible I gathered everyone near the sky hole to maximize their safety. The sound of children crying, crashing rocks disturbs my thinking. Fa Bo screams in pain, he has been hit by a rock, the rock too heavy to lift off his arm he shouts with his last breath "Everyone give Brother Logan a valued item to continue the legacy of the Mogao grotto Monks." As I collect all the items Fa Bo whispers in my ear with his soft wise tone "This is my fate, death is not to be feared when lived wisely, tell the world, don't forget us." Fa Bo's eyes pop, proceeding too quickly kicking me away from a crashing boulder that crashes being the last to fall of the collapsing grottoes, which now obstructs me from everyone. My chest suffocates, I cough dust out my lungs, gripping the boulder I use every ounce of sweat to push it away, however, I accept the death of the people who remade me. With what I have taken from the grottoes I ascend the sinkhole with my harness strapped on. Hanging from the crevices of the sinkhole with my callus hands, I stare at the clear starry night, each star is the monks looking over me, protecting me, now I owe the Monks the world for their love, guidance, and mentorship. Being taught everything, I look forward to the new man I've become. I am not mourning for the past, nor worrying about the future, but celebrating life and living in the present moment wisely and earnestly.

The Mysteries of the Mogao Caves

Carmel School – Elsa High School, Wigisser, Gabriel – 16

It had been a scorching day digging through the caves but they were now able to find some shade in one of the entrances. Standing in the mouth of the cave for shelter, while the sun burned the ground and the heat melted the cliffs, they were slowly recovering. Terry Conner and Reese Dunne were archeologists from Oxford University who were given the task of discovering the hidden secrets and mysteries of the recently excavated Mogao grottoes in China.

Once they had gotten some energy back, they walked in and instantly the smell of the stale air and the briny odor of slimy lichen kicked in. They had now reached the furthest part of the caves. No one had gone this far before.

Then they walked into one of the first rooms and found murals with different pictures depicting various scenarios like a story: the first image showed a bird giving out messages, on another wall, there were people joyfully crossing a bridge to a castle and a temple and next to that wall was a portrayal of people learning from Buddha. The colors brightened the room and gave some sort of life to it but there was an eerie feeling that the two felt: the room seemed to be breathing. Terry started to notice that with every new picture, the story seemed to grow more sinister and dangerous. Soon, Terry started to comment about what he was noticing about the walls, but every time Terry tried to mention his observation, Reese would ignore him. It seemed like Reese was focused on something else and disinterested in Terry.

"Let's get back out to the camp," said Terry. "I've left my notes and flashlights there. I need to jot all of this down so I can figure out the meaning of these stories." They retraced their steps to the rooms they came through when they realized that the pathways seemed to be winding and they were walking in circles.

"I think we're lost," said Terry.

"Try this way," said Reese and led the way for the first time.

They entered a new room which hardly had any light. They could barely make out the images on the wall. But that breathing sensation of the cave did not cease.

"It's here to the left," said Terry.

"No, it's to the right," replied Reese, his voice getting louder and louder.

"What are you thinking? It's this way!" Terry's tone rose as well.

"Okay then, why don't you go left and I'll go right and we can meet here again after ten minutes," said Reese. Terry looked at Reese in complete confusion wondering how his plan would work. He then rejected Reese's plan and said "No! That is not a good idea. What if one of us gets hurt?"

Reese replied, "No worries we have our transreceivers if anything happens."

"But what happens if they get jammed and we can't contact each other?" answered Terry with growing trepidation.

"Don't worry we have the new 1980 AMSER 536 not the old 1974 AME 890 which didn't work, we have the top equipment of our time nothing can go wrong. It's the year 1981 now! And what is there to worry about, it's just a cave" said Reese.

"Are you sure this is the newest model?" asked Terry, taking his iPhone out and Googling it.

"Yeah, yeah just trust me," said Reese.

"Ok fine whatever," replied Terry. He was still not convinced and insisted on staying together.

"Fine, we'll go your way. Let's turn right," said Terry.

As they walked down the narrow path, radiant colors from the wall came to life and the misty air covered the distance of the never ending path. The spoiled smell of the moist snails became stronger the further they walked down the path. Terry touched the cold coarse wall and the grittiness was biting on his fingers. Soon they started to hear squalls in the distance and stopped before some stairs that led to what seemed like a dead-end.

"Hold on, I think there's something here," Reese said and approached the huge rock that was blocking their way. "We should be able to move it. Come on, help me."

Terry and Reese pushed the rock and surprisingly it moved smoothly to the side.

"Careful it's dark here. Hold onto the walls to go down the stairs; we have to get down there. It seems like there is some sort of light down there," said Terry.

The hallway that they found themselves in was extremely narrow with an incredibly tall ceiling. The floor seemed to be wet with muddy water and they had to be cautious with every step.

Terry led the way and Reese followed. Suddenly, Reese fell and let out a scream which echoed and vibrated the hallway. The vibrations created from the scream made the walls and ceiling shake; the dangling plants at the top of the ceiling dropped water on to them.

"Reese what happened, are you ok?" Terry asked in a worried tone.

"I think I broke my ankle, it has been like this before, I can't move, it hurts too much." Reese replied in frustration.

Reese continued: "I can't go down, I'll stay here and wait for you to come back, make sure to try and remember everything so we can write it down on our notes and let me know if the exit of the cave is down there."

Terry couldn't argue with Reese about this and settled on going down alone.

As Reese held his ankle in pain Terry continued to go down. He used the walls for guidance again and the nerves were kicking in. Stalactites were hanging from the ceiling, bats were roosting up high, stalagmites were protruding from the floor, water was dripping from cracks in the ceiling. Terry could only use his hands to see; he felt the earthworms churning in the soil lodged in between the crevices of the wall. Step by step it felt like he was either walking on bones or twigs that were crunching underfoot.

When Terry was far down the stairs, Reese stood up in ease and walked back up the stairs and closed the opening of the chamber with the huge rock that blocked it earlier and dusted his hands with a smirk on his face and walked off.

Terry managed to exit the dark corridor and found himself in a brightly lit room. There were hundreds of torches hanging from the ceiling and the walls made Terry feel cautious. Others must have been here already to light up to the fire, thought Terry. He no longer saw on the walls the peaceful images of birds flying, people learning from Buddha or people going to a temple, but now he saw more of people being hunted by demons covered in blood of their victims, wild animals preying on humans and people being tortured in a room that looked oddly similar to the one he was in at that moment. Terry examined the walls carefully and saw the demons flying across the wall shadowing the innocent people but then he saw the wild animals chasing after young children and feasting on them. He could almost hear the screams of people being tortured through the walls and it seemed like the walls were talking to him. Unexpectedly, the movement stopped and froze and so did Terry. It felt like a stop in time and he was trapped for that second. Nothing moved. The walls, the images, the flickering flames from the torches all froze and blurred.

Terry then realized that the crunchiness underfoot were human bones and the torches lighting up the room were slowly getting dimmer because the water dripping from the ceiling was putting out the torches one by one. With the corner of his eye he noticed one more painting and it was of some mythical creature; it seemed like a horse that could fly with the stealth of a panther and the bite of an alligator holding skulls of humans with his multiple arms. Terry could not make out what it was. Before Terry had time to digest what he saw, the lichen and moss were engulfing the walls and the paintings started to vanish wall by wall, turning the room into absolute nothingness. Terry desperately looked for a way out but he could not see anything through this dense darkness.

Terry picked up his transceiver and spoke into it: "Reese, Reese! Can you hear me? Say something if you can hear me? There's something crazy happening here. I'm going back up."

There was no reply.

Terry then heard from the other side of the wall a cage rattling.

Reese took out his transceiver and called in an unknown voice and said, "He is in place now; he's trapped. You can let it out."

Reese suddenly heard some static noises from his transceiver and it was Terry screaming for help.

"REESE GET OUT NOW! THERE IS SOMETHING HERE! I'M TRAPPED! CALL FOR HELP!"

Reese muted his transceiver and walked out of the cave, feeling like a winner.

Terry sprinted towards the nearest wall and tried to find an opening. It was hopeless; the walls refused to move. Then, he heard it. Whatever it was; it was dashing towards him at lightning speed, and Terry could hear its growl getting louder and louder. The thing was vibrating the whole place, as it galloped and climbed the walls towards Terry.

The creature was at the entrance now. The only thing separating it from Terry was a rock blocking the entrance.

Terry then saw the rock move inch by inch. Dust started to fall with every thump from the creature. It was over. It was hopeless. But he continued trying to find ways to escape.

The rock would not hold.

The dust started to fall faster now.

The noises got louder and louder.

It crashed open.

Blackness everywhere.

Terry felt a hand grab his shoulders and shake him. It was 'The End'.

He took his goggles off. It really was over.

"Sorry, better luck next time. You've lost unfortunately," muttered the employee, taking the goggles from Terry.

"How is anyone meant to beat this level? That's impossible, the map is huge" cried Terry. "Where's Reese?"

"Over here," shouted Reese next to his mom, munching on Doritos. "I've won, I've managed to complete my mission. How did the chamber feel? HAHA."

"This whole metaverse thing is pretty neat, but I still don't understand what the big fuss is," said Reese's mom.

"Mom, I have explained it a hundred times. It's a combination of multiple elements of technology, including virtual reality, augmented reality and video where you can "live" within a digital universe and play games," said Reese.

"We should've googled the Mogao caves better. It was a lot more mysterious than I thought, I still don't understand how I was supposed to win," said Terry, grabbing his packet of Doritos. Terry continued: "Was the 1980 AMSER 536 walkie-talkie really the newest model?"

"No, I just made that up so that we could continue the game. I did not want to stop again," replied Reese.

"I tried to search it up but it didn't load, and then in the chamber my game started to glitch, I reckon if it hadn't glitched I would have passed the level" said Terry.

"Sure, you wish," replied Reese.

"Ok guys let's go home now, do you have everything for the sleepover Terry?" asked Reeses mother.

"Yes, thank you for the day," replied Terry

"Any time," answered Reese's mother.

The three of them walked out of the arcade with the neon sign 'The Mysteries of the Mogao Caves' flickering above them.

Back the Right Horse

CCC Chuen Yuen College, Ko, Sam – 16

Two men sat in a carriage travelling through a vast pile of sand. Both men wore white and blue striped shirts with Prussian blue sailor jackets. Their hair was shaved flat. The taller of the two men had blonde hair while the shorter one had dark brown hair with a thick brown moustache. It was the shorter man, whose sailor jacket was untidy, that attempted to peak outside the carriage by opening the curtain. Sand blew inside the carriage immediately. He covered his eyes and tears ran out. The taller blonde man chuckled and leaned across to close the curtain. This man's sailor jacket was tidier than his shorter counterpart, and he sat straight like a gentleman. The short one cursed and complained about the sand.

'Gustave! We have helped the lady Marianne conquer the sea, and you cry because of sand?' The tall gentlemanly man said.

'Stanislas, you bastard! Can you even shut up once!' The short man, Gustave, retorted. The bumpy carriage picked-up speed as though the horses had caught the short man's irritation. Stanislas burst out in good-humoured laughter.

'When I was drunk and slipped over, rather than helping me you talked trash.' Gustave continued, 'I got my arse kicked by that Ship-of-the-line lieutenant! And now you claim there is gold in this bloody desert. I don't want to be in this desert hell. We are sailors!'

Stanislas, the tall man, stretched his legs and pretended to sleep, like a father dealing with a petulant child. After some time had passed, Gustave opened the window again. Without the curtain blocking the view, he noticed the sandstorm had stopped.

'Bastard! I can't see anything! Chinese! Where have you taken us?' Gustave said. The Chinese driver wearing his straw hat replied with a heavy accent, as though Gustave cared to hear his response. Gustave pushed close the curtain again and moved his hands to his waist, searching for something to moisten his lips.

'I see barely anything but sand!' Gustave cursed as he rubbed his throat. He stared at Stanislas' water bottle, who, knowing quite well what Gustave needed, offered it to him.

'Thank-you my brother.' He skulled great gulps of water before passing an almost empty bottle back to Stanislas. 'I very much needed that.' The carriage suddenly stopped, and no sooner had Gustave regained his composure, than he yelled at the driver, 'Chinese! What's bloody happening!' He opened the curtain and poked his head outside to see they had reached a village gate.

'Leave the cart my friends. We have reached our destination.' The driver said in his heavy accent. He patted his horses, comforting them after their long journey. Gustave and Stanislas stepped out. Stanislas, now wearing his sailor cap, walked toward the driver, 'Hey Chinese,' and as the driver looked toward him, Stanislas tossed him two gold coins. The driver, catching them, replied, 'Lee, my name... you still need to follow me.'

'Where's that bloody cave? Where do you bring us?' Gustave asked. Lee did not reply but pointed toward two other Europeans in the centre of the village. They stood guarding rectangular boxes while their silver crosses glinted in the sunlight. Looking toward the two sailors they waved. Then one of them turned to Lee and scolded him in an English accent, 'Chinaman, you told us to wait here. Hurry up!' The other man, dressed in workwear, who appeared more German than British, looked at all of them impatiently and said nothing.

Gustave turned to Stanislas, 'What? We have to go with those Hans and pesky Brits?'

'Not every German is called Hans, Gustave.' Stanislas replied, calmly.

'Before we take leave in the morning my friends, perhaps, give me some tips for guidance, yes?' Lee asked. Lee, was one of the locals who had discovered the Mogao caves.

'That's unfair!' Exclaimed Gustave.

'Twenty gold will do.' Lee said, barely noticing their dissent.

'Twenty gold? That's daylight robbery,' the German-looking man spoke.

'The treasure will be worth more than twenty gold my friend.' Stanislas called to him in German.

'I grew up in Schiltigheim, Strasbourg, but learnt German from my uncle.' He replied, in French.

'Ah, so you're a Schilikois,' Stanislas replied, now also in French.

'Scheligemer,' he said in Alsatian.

Following this exchange, the four men seemed happy to call a truce and trailed into the inn to retire for the evening. Lee had since disappeared with his horses.

After a night's rest, Gustave met the Englishman and other Frenchman from Schiltigheim at the front door of the village inn while he waited for Stanislas to wake.

'Allow us to introduce ourselves. I'm Kevin, and Thomson, you'll recall from his brief exchange with your comrade yesterday. May God bless our journey toward the cave.'

'Sure, sure,' Gustave replied, and lit his pipe.

'Well then, best we get ready,' said Kevin, awkwardly clearing his throat. And the two men disappeared back into the inn, leaving Gustave smoking his pipe.

When Stanislas emerged, Gustave yelled at him for sleeping in and delaying the start of the journey. Lee came around the front with the packed horses. The other men returned, and the waylaid group headed off toward the caves with Lee guiding the horses in front.

When the better part of the day had passed, Gustave yelled, 'Bloody hell! We have been sitting since sunrise behind these farting horses, and now the sun is setting.'

No sooner had he spoken than a building with red pillars rose from the marches. Drawing closer, the building loomed over them. Seven-storeyed pillars with great archways, etched in astounding details, gleamed in the sunset. Above the arches were roofs of faded greyish-green tiles, and a yellow spiced wall making the desert pale in comparison.

'I haven't seen such beauty before. This cannot compare even to Winchester Cathedral!' Kevin gasped and started to set-up his apparatus.

'Ah, a camera. I see, you're sure a man of culture,' said Stanislas.

'Well, we better get in!' Gustave said. He and Thomson made a rush toward the entrance. Lee, seeing their greed, said in his broken English, 'Well, now you see the cave, we better get back, eh?' Ignoring Lee, the group continued to the entrance, while Thomson, who had turned around, sidled up to Lee. Thomson drew his gun and pointed it into Lee's stomach, 'Let us in, or else...' he whispered.

'Sure, sure my friends! You can get in there if you find an entrance! No business right now!' Lee spoke with a trembling voice, but loud enough as though the others were still within hearing distance.

Thomson caught up to Gustave who was already at the entrance. Stanislas walked slowly toward them with a cigarette in mouth. Kevin followed closely behind with his apparatus under one arm.

'Beware of the rocks.' Stanislas called out to Gustave.

Gustave started to make his way over the yellow sandstone boulders. Thomson, on his heels, arrived at the same time and they both stomped into the dark cave. Thomson lifted his torch light. Looking around, they saw nothing but stone pillars and wall paintings. Thomson cursed. Gustave complained about how much time and effort they'd wasted. When Stanislas and Kevin arrived their ooohhs and aaahhs showed how they admired what they saw. Setting up his apparatus to take photos again, Kevin noticed something. His eyes followed one of the wall paintings that reached the ground. The bottom of the painting had a different colour. Stanislas, observing Kevin, looked in the same direction and then pointed it out to Gustave. Gustave murmured something about 'special' and kicked

the painted wall. To the group's utter surprise, the wall collapsed. After the rubble settled, an opening to another room appeared. Stanislas pushed out his arm to stop Gustave and Thomson before they charged in.

'There won't be much oxygen in there if it has been sealed a long time.' Stanislas said. Kevin took some more photos to distract himself from the awkward silence that ensued.

Thomson, who had grown impatient, pushed past and into the room. Gustave quickly stepped in behind him, and gasped. In front of them, in the middle of the room, stood a giant statue of Buddha. Smaller Buddha's surrounded the top of the wall, and paintings of monks hung below.

'Exquisite!' Kevin exclaimed, who'd since stepped into the room, 'these are made by humans? I simply cannot believe it!'

'Exquisite!' Scoffed Gustave. 'I want gold! Can beauty earn money? I know gold can!' Going to the rear of the room, Gustave attempted to pick up a gold Buddha statue.

'Stanislas! Help me get this one!' Gustave shouted to Stanislas, rubbing the toe of the giant Buddha with his whole hand.

'You can't pick those up. They are not yours.' Kevin said.

'If we don't take these, the others will. Nobody cares!' Gustave replied.

'Don't be greedy...' Stanislas began.

'I'm going to be rich! I can quit my job and become someone great!' Thomson grabbed five to six paintings and jade Buddhas.

'Leave some for me!' Gustave complained.

Thomson walked quickly toward to entrance with his loot. Kevin attempted to stop him, but Thomson pushed him into one of the pillars. His camera apparatus hit the pillar and broke into pieces.

'You... Hans bastard!' Gustave yelled after Thomson.

Thomson pointed his gun toward Gustave. Both the French sailors ducked behind the pillars. A loud BANG rang above their heads. Stanislas felt the walls loosen. The French sailors made a run for it. No sooner had they got outside, the wooden frame of the entrance collapsed blocking Kevin, who'd staggered behind them with his pieces of camera, inside. Hearing Thomson's boots running into the distance, Gustave and Stanislas looked back to the collapsed entrance, struggling to decide whether to chase Thomson or help Kevin.

'Come on, we must help a European!' Stanislas called. Gustave then ran to his side and immediately helped him lift rubble from the entrance.

'We are bothers!' Gustave yelled.

It didn't take long before the men had cleared the rubble, tossing great boulders aside, and freeing Kevin. In the distance they heard a POW and neighing noises. All three ran from the cave to find Lee lying on the ground.

'Lee! What happened to you?' Gustave rushed and supported Lee from behind his neck. Blood was draining from Lee's stomach. His face was chalk white.

'That... cross, my friend...' he coughed and continued, 'can you pray for me... like my father when I was young...' Lee's weak voice trailed off. Kevin approached and held his cross. Comforting Lee he took his hand, and mumbled a prayer. Lee closed his eyes.

'Poor man,' said Gustave, 'still, I don't think he would mind if I took his gold. He cannot take it to heaven.' Kevin stared at him, but it didn't stop Gustave reaching into Lee's still warm pockets.

'We will bury you, old man,' Gustave sighed and crossed himself.

A few hours after they buried Lee, the evening turned to night and the warmth of the day plummeted to freezing conditions. Getting colder and colder, Kevin said, 'If we don't get reach the village soon, we're going to freeze to death!'

'You're right! Gustave laughed. 'Perhaps one more hour is all it will take for your nobility.'

'To be born rich doesn't make me nobility! Furthermore, I am not as weak as you think!' Kevin objected.

In the small wee hours of the freezing night, they arrived back at the village. They could see Thomson in the stable.

'You! You're a pirate! Killing people as you wish!' Gustave exclaimed and rushed toward him. Stanislas and Kevin followed. Thomson drew his gun and pointed it at Stanislas, then Gustave, and quickly back to Stanislas, while Kevin hid behind Stanislas.

'Don't you dare stop me from getting rich!' Thomson hissed.

'You killed a man. It's unjustifiable,' Stanislas replied.

'Do you know how my boss oppressed me! Only the rich have power! Not the mere labourers!'

Stanislas calmly adjusted his sailor cap. Gustave, who'd taken out his pipe for one last puff, looked at Stanislas. Kevin, still behind him, did not want to move to wipe the sweat away. Gustave's puffing on his pipe was making Thomson more and more nervous. Stanislas put his hand into his coat. Thomson targeted Stanislas' hand in his pocket. Gustave rubbed the ground with his shoe, distracting Thomson, who then pointed his gun at Gustave, and back at Stanislas.

'Charge!' Gustave yelled. Before Thomson could redirect his gun toward a charging Gustave, Stanislas threw a cap at him, and Thomson missed the shot. The sound shocked the horses in the stable and they bolted, startling Thomson before he could fire his gun again. Hooves pounding, the horses charged at Thomson, his legs scuttling between theirs, while large neighing noises outbid Thomson's screams. Kevin, shocked by the sudden violence prayed for Thomson.

'What a pity, he seems to be such a gentleman,' Gustave said, sarcastically. Stanislas made a loud whistle and the horses calmed down.

'These horses were raised by Lee. They have had their revenge.' Stanislas said. Thomson's legs were badly injured, they were at awkward angles and bleeding. Kevin came to his side.

'It's as cruel as what he did to Lee if we leave him like this. I will take care of him here,' Kevin said.

'What now?' Gustave asked.

'At least you've got some gold from Lee. That's worth for an adventure, huh?' Stanislas said.

'If only we got those paintings as well...' Gustave nodded and sighed.

'There's no time for that now,' Stanislas said, 'our ship will set sail without us if we don't leave now.'

'But how?' Gustave said. The two men looked left and right for a carriage but there was only one in the distance.

'I know!' said Gustave, 'Lee's horses.' The two sailors ran to where the cart was and saddled up two of the horses.

'Giddy-up' Stanislas whipped the horses into action.

'Let's drive this bad boy to the next village and get ourselves a driver to Kouang-Tchéou-Wan!' Gustave said as he leapt into the cart. 'That bastard!' Gustave laughed. Lying there, in the cart, were the paintings and jade Buddhas Thomson had looted. 'Now that's worth for an adventure.'

'Thomson really wanted to get away,' said Stanislas.

'He backed the wrong horse,' said Gustave.

The Grottoes

CCC Kei Yuen College, Kan, Yui Ue – 14

I am Lily Scarlett, and I love trekking and climbing. It is even better if I can go climbing in Western China, where the scenery is breathtaking. I will also mention that I have found quite a lot of interesting rocks along the way, even semi-precious gemstones. I have an amazing affinity for natural rock formations.

Today, I am exploring the area that surrounds The Mogao Grottoes. They are located in Gansu Province. The grottoes contain thousands of paintings, carvings, sculpture, books, and scrolls that are thousands of years old, hidden away in the grottoes. The fact that not all of the treasures have been found as of yet piqued my interest in climbing there.

Before I began my journey, I gathered some tools. I needed a good harness to protect me from falling. I needed a helmet to protect my head at all times. Better safe than sorry! And I also needed a decent light, not to mention safety ropes, anchors, and a GPS watch!

I then went to Panyu South Station. My family members greeted me there and reminded me to be careful. They are constantly worried about my safety when I go on these adventures, but at the same time, they want me to do what I love and follow my curiosity. Therefore, they hugged me and reminded me to stay in contact.

Once I got to Mogao, which took just 19 hours via high speed rail, I could feel the driest wind and hear the most unusual sounds. There seemed to be an echo or a howl coming from the grottoes themselves. It was eerie. The feeling of the warm sandstone on my hands was very different from the feeling of the rock in Guangdong.

After what seemed to be hours of trekking, I found a hidden ledge on an outcropping.

I was off the beaten path, and I was exhausted. I considered pitching my tent for the night and took some energy gel. The beautiful desert landscape below me was mesmerising.

From my spot on the ledge, I noticed something incredible about the sky! Lavender clouds were forming. I felt as though they were sucking me in, leading me deeper into the grottoes. My eyes followed one particular lavender cloud, and then I noticed a small cave in the distance.

There was still a good hour of light, so I decided to walk there. I entered the small cave carefully and looked around. This small cave looked like a laboratory or an office, with ancient scrolls and papers scattered around. There was a large jar in the middle of the

room. The place was old, dirty, mysterious, and fascinating.

Suddenly, there was a figure standing right before me! I stared, and my whole body froze! My mind freaked out, wondering if I had gone crazy. I tried to speak, but I was so startled that I couldn't utter a word.

The old man started to speak.

"My name is Jacob. Welcome to my office!"

"H...Hello, I'm Lily. Sorry that I came in without permission, but why is your office out here in an open cave?" I uttered with hesitation.

"Well, so few people come up here. Actually, you are the first visitor in almost fifty years. Why are you here?" Jacob asked.

"Ah...my eyes were following a cloud formation, and then I caught sight of this cave. So I sort of stumbled in here by accident."

"Ha, very nice. I am making my favourite dish, it's very simple ! Would you like to share a meal with me?"

We shared a thick, root tea. It was nourishing and warm. Jacob explained that he was an explorer and a treasure hunter. In the beginning, when he started searching the acres that surrounded the Mogao Grottoes, he had quite a lot of success and sent his discoveries to museums in Germany and France, not to mention a number of private collectors. However, he mentioned that he hadn't made any major discoveries in the past few years.

As Jacob continued speaking and showed me a few of his prize scrolls and paintings, it dawned on me that what he was doing was actually theft. He worked off the grid like this because he did not want to be discovered.

I got nervous as the evening wore on, especially as I came to view his work in a negative light. So I decided to make a break for it. Can you imagine my nerves as he showed me stolen artifact after stolen artifact? I was sure he could tell that I knew it was a clandestine operation. I started to get my gear ready in my hands. The next time he turned his back, it felt like a life or death situation as I ran!

He was elderly, so I knew that he would not be able to catch me with a good head start.

I bolted out of cave, but I found it difficult to grab the rock in the half-darkness. I think I made it because I am an experienced climber and it was a smooth and easy climb. I got down to safety and kept running.

I reached the valley floor, and then ran for another 20 minutes through the grottoes. Entirely through luck, I eventually found a road and a good wifi signal, so I called for an Uber to take me back to the station.

When I got back to the high speed rail station and waited for my train, I realised that the mystery of the place- the grottoes- was not only the treasure of the desert sands, but the memory and the shadows of the scholars, explorers, and thieves who had been in and out of the grottoes over the past 900 years.

I didn't feel any sense of accomplishment at the end of my trek through the Mogao Grottoes. I just felt that I needed to leave that place, that it represented a time and place that no longer exists. In fact, I am not even sure that Jacob really exists.

Did that really *happen*?

I can only go back when I am ready.

New Tales of the Mogao Grottoes

Creative Secondary School, Chan, Jodi – 16

In the corner of the quiet library, he finally found what he was looking for. Balancing on his tiptoes, reaching for the book with the name “The Mogao Grottoes,” he began reading the first chapter: *“In 1900, the Mogao Grottoes was discovered by a monk named Yuezun..”* He noticed that there was a bookmark placed in the book. Feeling curious, he flipped to the page. A sudden loud whoosh, and he found himself in the middle of a desert, empty and endless, no buildings and no people, not even a sound. He screamed for help, but no one answered, all he could hear was the sound of the wind. He was confused and scared, so he followed a path until he found a temple that was built on a cliff. He entered the temple, hoping that people there could help him.

The moment he stepped into the temple he saw four gigantic statues standing right in front of him. He felt uncomfortable because it felt like there were four people staring at him. A noise was coming through one of the caves, so he followed the sound. He hid in the corner, peeking into the cave and listening to the conversation. A sound said “Yuezun, I have hidden the paintings under the statue.” Another said “Shhhh! Great, make sure nobody finds out, those paintings were from the Ming Dynasty, we can make 100 million dollars if we sell them out.” The boy widened his eyes when he heard the word 100 million. He decided to hide and wait until those two monks left, then he could find whether there were any paintings under the statue. He snuck in quietly, lifting and dropping his legs lightly, trying not to make any noise. He approached the statue in the corner, he moved the statue carefully, and found an old wooden box with different beautiful paintings in it. “I guess they won’t find out if I just take three paintings with me.” He took out three paintings, grabbing tightly in his hand. Unfortunately, when he moved the statue back again, one of the paintings dropped from his grip with a *thump!* He knew that the monk would be there in minutes - he must escape, or he would be in big trouble.

His hands full of paintings and jewelries, trying to find the way back out to the desert. However, he didn't know that once he stole the paintings, destroying the original timeline, he could not return to the normal timeline. He walked and walked, feeling like he was getting lost in the maze of caverns. After years and years, he became the “real monk” replacing the old one.

A boy saw the book on the floor when he walked past the bookshelf, he picked it up and flipped to the page where the bookmark was placed, traveling back 120 years ago.....

How Can I Fall into Oblivion?

Creative Secondary School, Chan, Kerrie – 15

“Of all the people my heart could have chosen, it has decided on a person, who didn't have enough room in his heart to love someone like me.”

On one of the finest days in memory, an exploration group called “佛奏” came across the Mogao Grottoes. They were one of the most well-known exploration groups, and they had been through many journeys; it had been rumoured that all of them were excellent scholars. The group consisted of four people. One of them carried a neat look but ruffled hair along with survival gear wrapped up all over him: he was named Zhanhu and was the leader of the group. His teammates were Aiguo, Guanyin, and Bingwen, who had the roles of cartographer; observer, and supplier respectively. A perfect team in which everybody has a specific role, solving mysteries that were unknown for eternity. But out of everything, they shared the same goal; **they were all determined to create a breakthrough and thus change history.**

Unexpectedly, they suddenly received a vast amount of telegrams suggesting that they try to explore a place called “Mogao Grottoes”. After gathering up at their supplies, Aiguo announced,

“According to the map, it is an oasis located at a religious and cultural crossroads on the Silk Road in Gansu. In Dunhuang, Jiuquan, which is apparently in China.”

Bigwen responded. *“I've heard rumours about this; it goes by the name of the Treasure House of Art; it stores things like floor-to ceiling paintings or ancient clay sculptures. But, something is definitely fishy about it, maybe we should step out of it?”* He sounded knowledgeable about it, but secretly, he did not want his members to go on an inspection of this concealed place.

“In that case, I am assured that we have enough supplies to go on a trip; the decision will only be finalised by Zhanhu anyway!”

Guanying almost squealed out, as expected of the youngest member of the group, excited for possibly a new opportunity to investigate.

Out of nowhere, a familiar voice was heard at the back of the room near the door.

“Now, now... settle down. Firstly, I've been listening to you all carefully. Secondly, I have heard about the case we are dealing with, and the finalised decision is that we'll go and investigate since my interest is piqued by the stories of magnificent art, and I believe that it would be quite an enlightening experience for all of us. Any objections?”

Zhanhu the leader spoke, as if he was daring anyone to disagree with his choice. This resulted in his members nodding in silence.

They were tired and dusty from the desert, but right in front of their eyes was this ancient historical structure. Located on a cliff, but it had this mythical aura surrounding it, like there was magic present within the place; each one the members could sense it when they had arrived so they all got chills up their spine. As they entered the temple-like building, they did not acknowledge the urban myth told by the locals in the desert because that was beyond them.

“Alright everyone, let's split up and search these caves. Be back in around 20 minutes and return to this main arena with the warrior statue as a marking and make sure not to get lost!”

Zhanhu commanded, he sounded somewhat stern but yet he felt anxious on behalf of his heartbeat.

“Understood !”

The others yelled out with confidence, ready for whatever might happen during the mission, even if it cost their lives.

But little did they know, someone was watching them from afar, with the feeling of curiosity rushing through their veins.

“Ehehe.... he is quite my type...cute and commanding at the same time...”

It felt wrong. Zhanhu had a feeling they were not alone in temple; it was like something else was staring from behind, and it definitely felt suspicious. As he spoke, he swore he saw someone out of the corner of his eye. He was certain

As he strolled through the building, it was nothing special to be honest. Time had passed in the blink of an eye; but Zhanhu kept having the sensation that he was being watched: frequent glances; filled with lust; filled with hope. He was aware that someone is there.

"He's magnificent! Did you see? Did you? He spotted my presence."

A young female statue's spirit known as Aspara squeaked out to her best friend, another statue spirit called Kuan. In the Mogao Grottoes, they were known as "花欣". Two gorgeous female spirits; history said that they were forced to embody the physicality of a statue with a love spell. They needed to find someone to love to break the spell. However, it was essential that the feeling was reciprocated by the significant other; otherwise, the statue would rot due to "Aito's curse", resulting in it shattering into a million of non-retrievable pieces. On the other hand, if the partner does return the feelings, the spirit will then be released back to its original form as a human, but to do that they must eliminate the mastermind. Killing the one who cast the curse.

"Remember, there is a risk of being erased from the world if he doesn't reciprocate the feelings towards you..."

Kuan warned her one and only friend with concern. As she didn't quite have the ability to stop Aspara, she could only spectacle and see how the show unfolded.

"Maybe I should confess to him? I mean there is some chance that he would love me back! Although...it would risk my life.... it's worth it! He is like the most endearing thing I've seen in over 1000 human years!"

Aspara literally screamed out in the last sentence, but it was the truth; their spirits had been locked in the statue for who knows how long. Of course, they'd been longing to transform back into being human; both of them missed it to a greatly.

With that, she finalized her decision with a ray of sunlight beaming onto her through a crack in the cave, leaving her dear friend speechless.

It was almost time to meet up with the other members. Yet, I was just inspecting a room around the corner where there were a lot of man-made sculptures and statues. I, Zhanhu, hated to admit, but they all looked gorgeous with a perfect amount of elegance in them. The sculptor must have really been passionate about it. Suddenly, I heard an unfamiliar sound coming from one of the sculptures. It was the voice of a girl; a soft and genuine one.

"Pssst ! Hey! Hey!"

As I turned my head around, I couldn't spot anyone yet.

"I'm right in front of you but next to the statue you were looking at a moment ago! Over here!"

With the instructions given, I followed them obediently like a dog to its owner.

"Gah! Is this female statue talking? Or am I actually going insane?! This is an illusion, right? Probably.... I hope-"

"How rude of you to call me an illusion! I'm actually a spirit in the statue. My name is Aspara. It is wonderful to meet you, Zhanhu."

"How do you even know my name....?"

"Well...I might have eavesdropped on your troop earlier....but anyway, I have important stuff to say!"

What? What in the world is this girl blabbering about? She knows my name; she sounds entirely fine, like speaking with a stranger. But, she is not even a human; this is so strange that I can't properly process the things through my brain anymore !

"So, please start talking..."

Mhm. I had a sense that he would definitely be shocked knowing about my curse, anyone would be in reality. Can't you imagine it, being locked up in the inescapable cage of despair unless you meet your soulmate; the one that means true love; the one that is designated for you; the one that fate connects your life with. As I took a deep breath, I explained "Aito's curse" to him with patience and seriousness.

"You can't get out in any other way other than reciprocated love?"

"I'm afraid I cannot. In this spirit form, I can only wander around the place. When I attempted to get out, the spell blocks my escape. Basically, I am stuck here for who knows how long, yet my spirit hasn't aged at all."

Although I couldn't see her, I could hear her long sigh of hopelessness, that made my heart ache for a slight second. It was a normal human phenomenon, to feel empathy towards another, at least that's what I think that made me have the patience to acknowledge her situation.

"Listen carefully...I've been watching you ever since you walked into this place...I felt something in my heart...it was like love at first sight ! I-it's so hard to describe, but it made me feel so overwhelmed but joyful at the same time....n-now that I've known you better...there is just a sense telling me that you're the one with no doubt ! U-umm I-I love you, and I'm willing to be with you forever! You are so perfect...so adventurous, a leader, adventurous... That's why I have chosen you to be the one...to set me free from this spell...."

Aspara rambled on desperately, her heart filled with years of pain; she was very eager, and she wanted to be set free from the pain of being locked up; from the mindset of despair; from this horrible wicked place that the mastermind is behind.

Oh. My. Goodness. This woman did not just confess to me. She's also begging me to take her with me. I would love to but, that means I would then have to kill the one behind this act. But just who could it be?

I then hear footsteps fading into my ears.

"Oh my dear Aspara...it seems like you have finally found the opportunity to escape this living hell....."

"Speak of the devil...shut up and just reveal yourself you malicious wizard.....!"

As Aspara spoke up forcefully, none other than Bingwen stepped out of the dark.

"Wait. Don't tell me you are the one all behind this. Bingwen?! You dare to betray us with this evil doing..."

"My my...both of your attitudes seem very similar...what a perfect pair to be joined by fate! And no, I did not betray you Zhanhu; it was just a secret I've hidden all long....you were just naïve. You should have figured it out sooner."

Bingwen smirked while saying the first few sentences but his facial expression immediately changed into one that was filled with disgrace and insanity simultaneously.

"Tch....As your leader I only feel disappointed in you Bingwen....out of everyone, who knew it was gonna be you....?"

As Zhanhu said that, Bingwen then transformed from his disguise. The man who had nerdy glasses on, a tidy outfit and hiking boots then turned into an elegant wizard within a second. Then proceed to glare in their direction, a sight mixed with hope and despair. Those bright red gory eyes would give anyone chills through their spine. His gigantic coat full of a patterns of the galaxy seemed surreal; it was like magical powers surrounding him, almost like an overpowered character from any hero versus villain scenario. Sparkling long hair tied up into a thin ponytail, flowing with the powerful aura around it, blew in the breeze. He laughed with malice towards the two, then went into a fit of paradoxical laughter.

"Bahahaha! You should have seen the look on your faces when I summoned my true form! Oh how I would not get bored looking at it every single day! Hold on.... I forgot, Zhanhu can't look at you since you're a spirit! Let me grant you the power of being seen as a spirit by a mere human for just a little while."

With that being said, he cast a spell on Aspara in another language; Zhanhu finally was able to see her.

She was really stunning. At that time, I felt like time was frozen, not a single part of my body could move at all. I could see everything, her beautiful sapphire blue eyes, her glorious shoulder-length hair brushing on her shoulders, a flower crown on her head filled with messy yet gorgeous flower petals overflowing with loyalty.

My heart skipped a beat at this moment.

"Now, now... would you two just stop acting lovey-dovey here, it makes me be seen as a third wheel, have mercy on me will ya? So, what do you think, Zhanhu? Would you kill your best friend over this precious girl that you don't even know to break her out from Aito's curse ? Or would you let your best friend that you had known for years survive and watch this girl rot to death right in front of you? A friend or an innocent girl ?"

I was lost for words.

And I stood there like a statue

"I-I...."

I was stuttering so much.

But I couldn't help it.

Oh lord, please help me.

I need to get this curse off me no matter what. I've dealt with it for way longer than I had dreamt possible. Honestly, I'm sick of it. Before there were many people coming to investigate this place, I was always looking out to find my Prince Charming to save me! But over time, me and Kuan had definitely noticed that the amount of people that used to come to Mogao Grottoes to look at the ancient architecture has decreased significantly. But, seeing Zhanhu suddenly was like he was my destined saviour. I couldn't let go of him no matter what.

He's the one that will save me.

I am positive about it.

He is the one.

Right ?

"I'm tired of standing here and losing my soul... Well.... what is your answer Zhanhu ?"

"I-I...will..."

I had to make a choice. I don't want to kill anyone here. I have so many memories with Bingwen, he was like a brother to me ever since he joined the group.

"I will not kill you Bingwen.....my sincere apologies Aspara.....please forgive me..."

I said it subconsciously. I didn't really know Aspara at all...although I didn't want to harm anyone....I did not dare to kill Bingwen either

"Y-you.... are willing to kill me for the evil wizard...?"

"My, my, my....isn't this the end of world for you, Aspara? I bet you're overflowing with despair, even your eyes say it more clearly than you could! Any last words ?"

Aspara started coughing violently.

"I'm so sorry Aspara.....I-I just can't seem to make the right choice...."

Zhanhu said softly as there were droplets of tears puddling in the corner of his eyes.

" I-I...was...w-wrong about....y-you Zhanhu...I-I guess...I-I was....not....d-destined to be with y-you....a-after all....I-I'll never forgive you for this....."

As Aspara coughed out her last sentence weakly. Zhanhu could only watch as guilt overwhelmed him.

"Now...Aspara...vanish as you have never existed in this world !"

The poor girl's soul was then forced back into her statue and then it started to crack bit by bit. And then when it was all cracked up into millions of tiny pieces.

It all shattered all at once.

Billions of her remains were all over the floor.

She no longer existed in the cruel world.

Bingwen only smirked while Zhanhu was having a breakdown, mumbling "I'm sorry" over and over.

A few years later, the event had never been spoken of and the exploration group continued on for years of time. Zhanhu had still not forgiven Bingwen for the incident even though years have passed. Their friendship was almost still the same as before, but there was just a gap in between them because of Aspara. Zhanhu just simply could not get over it, it was within his heart and soul; the pain was too much. On the other hand, Bingwen just acted like it never actually happened.

Kuan was still alone at Mogao Grottoes, but she had already anticipated this ending. Her heart was still grieving for Aspara, her dearest friend.

On one of the darkest nights, Zhanhu laid in his bed peacefully staring out his window. There were stars and a moon glimmering against his eyes, it was indeed a beautiful sight. But all of these things only made him remember the past. He imagined how much pain Aspara went through when her existence was being taken away.

“Even on this day, Aspara. I am still begging for your forgiveness....it hurts so much to recall about you even though you're not here anymore....I thought I'd just forget but I can't...they say I'm a timid person and now I finally am able to understand it”

He was talking to no one, but he had to get his self-loathing out because it bothered him every single moment of his life.

“Will I be able to fall into oblivion?”

The Journey of Ryzen and Mary

Creative Secondary School, Chan, Ryan – 15

In the burning heat of the Dunhuang desert, sand was flickering as the thick blustery wind blew on the hard rocks. And in the thick fog of sand on the horizon, two shadows can be spotted, as they slowly walk along the deep sand, they find themselves standing in front of a big structure. There was an arch-like entrance made with red bricks with multiple layers that seem to have decayed over time. As the two people covered in thick clothing covered in sand, wearing dark-colored boots which color has faded to grey, they silently take off the goggles they have been wearing for their entire 5 year-long journeys, they took a look at the glamorous view of the stunning building, and muttered words with relief:

“...We finally found it huh”

It was a deep voice of a man, a voice of someone who has experienced an abundance of crisis and mishap and has overcome them seamlessly. In short, a competent man. Another voice responding to the words of relief can be heard next to the man

“Yeah, ...we finally did it!”

It was the voice of a young lady, a charismatic tune. The two people, speechless before the gorgeous establishment in the middle of the desert, voiced out in unison

“We found it, the Mogao Grottoes.”

With boots full of sand, the siblings carefully step inside the cave of nature, they head in after lighting a torch with a match and a stick they picked up in the middle of their road. They were the adventurers, Ryzen and Mary. While walking along the wide corridor with detailed art engraved in the walls and pillars, Mary couldn't hide her amusement:

“Woah! This is amazing! I wonder how long the ancient people have spent on this!.”

Mary exclaimed from the depths of her heart, hearing that, Ryzen responded without hesitation.

“The ancient civilians of buddhas which lived here has spent a total of 27 years building this, which concluded-”

“Yeah yeah yeah right, I was just exclaiming over the beautiful artwork, I don't need your detailed analysis”

“tch, it's you who asked”

“hmpf!”

As they quarreled without resentment, they walked across numerous rooms with detailed paintings showing stories of the Buddha and scenes of everyday life and social interactions of the people there and with art and objects that illustrate the meeting of cultures along the Silk Road.

“I never expected to see this much-handcrafted artwork here! Still, we need to find the ancient art piece, so don't get distracted, Mar-”

“Hey, look, look! This painting is glamorous! The details are well-drawn and we can see how much work the artist put into this!”

‘She's already distracted...’ Ryzen thought As they walked down the painstakingly hand-carved pathway, at last, they encountered a huge room, diligent artwork and sculptures throughout the entire room.

As they walked inside, paying serious attention to their surroundings, they arrived in the center of the room and sat down.

They have been walking for hours since they last rested, so Ryzen thought it was reasonable to take a rest. As they slowly sat down on the floor, they checked the gear they had with them, a couple thousand miles away from the Mogao grottoes, from a merchant, they bought an axe with gun powder stuck on it, and will explode on impact and a spear which has a torch with multiple glass shards, condensing the light, forming a deadly laser, called the laser spear.

Ryzen, being the muscular man with high physical abilities and high fighting ability, was appointed as the vanguard. Mary, with quick-witted thinking and sharp instincts but a low fighting ability, was appointed as a supporter for Ryzen. Ryzen was wearing a half-body metal and stone plated armor on his body and joints as well as gloves on his wrists, with 2 stone axes on his waist on a belt. On his back is a laser spear, his figure was agile and sturdy with a reliable presence.

On the other hand, Mary has a stone chest plate and shoulder armor only, as she was simply to command actions and provide support, only light gear and support weapons were needed for her.

According to the information they received, the art piece which was said to have the power of long life was in a secret room inside the mogao grottoes, and after searching for a while, they found it.

They looked at a stone wall, a stone wall inside the depths of the mogao grottoes, behind this wall is a secret room. The wall has a clay-like material sealing off a hole which can't be seen easily, but if you concentrate on the wall, it can be clearly seen. This is the secret entrance to the labyrinth, the dungeon [Tomb of Yuezen].

"Back off."

Said Ryzen who then punched the stone wall full strength. A loud shutter can be heard throughout the area as the wall shattered, revealing a dark pathway ahead, Mary silently nodded, acknowledging Ryzen's overwhelming strength and the fact that she is going to enter the dungeon, the popular suicide spot.

Taking a glance at each other, Ryzen returned with a fierce and determined glare, words weren't even needed, they understood each other....

"Let's go, Mary!"

"Yeah!"

Ryzen raised his voice for the first time in a while, whilst Mary replied to him determinedly. And thus, they stepped inside the labyrinth.

An hour has passed since they stepped foot in the labyrinth, they were walking along the dark tunnel, with not much light, Mary was carrying a torch light up the area while Ryzen was concentrating on potential traps and enemies.

"Hey, there isn't much here, huh"

Complained the bored Mary.

"Don't let your guard down, Mary. An enemy could suddenly come out"

Before Ryzen could finish her sentence, he sensed a tripwire hook triggered, and to his left, the wall suddenly started to change shape and bricks were shifting between each other.

"Trap! Run! Opposite to that wall! Now!"

Ryzen cried out while panicking. Hearing his warning, Mary braced and ran. Before long, arrows started to shoot out from the shifting wall. In shock, Ryzen, running, slid himself on the floor. while Mary pulled out a pouch from her waist and threw at the incoming arrows. In the dozens of arrows launched from the trap, an arrow hit the pouch.

“Brace!”

‘BOOM’

The pouch busted as it exploded with a ‘boom’ while Mary warned Ryzen, the explosion was caused by a bag of gunpowder Mary held in emergencies. The explosion shattered and burned half of the arrows while the shockwaves majorly changed the trajectory of the arrows as it crashed into the walls.

“Phew, that was close!”

Said Ryzen in a reassuring tone. Mary was flabbergasted, the trap was so sudden and out of the blue that they couldn’t even process what happened. They were lucky Mary was able to react in time and Amber was able to detect the trap, or else...

That, was truly terrifying....

After having their mouths agape and shocked for a while, they had a slight rest and a raise of morale, and so they continued on the journey, while this time, extra vigilant.

As they journeyed on the deadly labyrinth, lethal traps were laid out everywhere, sometimes in plain sight, sometimes camouflaged, sometimes hidden with sudden triggers, every time the party encountered them, Ryzen would always try to nip the bud, it didn’t always work and some of them made they suffer some lesser injuries, but they continued forward after treating the wounds from band-aid that they brought with them.

And so, they explored for hours and hours, it was nothing they have experienced before. It wasn’t joyful, it was exciting and interesting, but all those emotions were overrun by the dreadful stress and exhaustion throughout the journey. Despite that, they journeyed on, and so, they eventually entered a large, empty room with seemingly nothing

What the both of them saw was astonishing and extravagant, a beautifully sculpted room with golden pillars in the corners. Artwork and treasures filled the enormous room, the room was so big it was comparable to an entire soccer field. What was strange was that this room was dark. So dark it looked like they were looking in an infinite dark void. But with a slight silhouette moving in the shadows, they saw a dark shadow on a throne with a scroll on his left hand and a sharp, polished golden scimitar on his right.

“...What brings you people here?”

The man on the dark throne spoke in a deep and blood-curdling voice. Like a voice of shockwaves piercing their hearts and body, truly frightening.

“The ancient art piece.”

Spoke Mary, bravely to the man in the shadows.

“...hoo, interesting. Now, if you want the art piece, you gotta go through me, the man known as the strongest man in the entire world, mastering all martial arts and the sword and has trained muscles that have the strength to live a hundred men for the past hundreds of years! Now! Challenge me for your treasure, adventurers!”

With their enemy being the strongest man in the entire world that has lived for hundreds of years, training every day and mastering martial arts and weapons, most likely the scimitar he is holding, both of them gulped and took a deep breath, and stayed determined.

“Raaaaagh!!”

“I’ll support you, leave your back to me!”

They both gave themselves a roar and dashed into the darkness. Ryzen in the front as the vanguard, dual-wielding boom axes, bolting full tilt towards Yuezen. While Mary is behind Ryzen providing support with long-range weapons and the laser spear.

Ryzen plunged himself towards the man on the throne... The man disappeared from the throne in a split second.

“!!”

In an attempt to search for Yuezen, Ryzen looked around, but before he was able to notice, he was struck by a blow from behind. A steel-like fist struck his back, causing him to fly forward at an intense speed, only to get kicked in the face with overwhelming power promptly. Without a chance to react, Ryzen was knocked back for dozens of meters and rolled on the ground like a rugby ball before coming to a stop with his body not being able to move, facing the ceiling. Ryzen was knocked out in two blows from Yuezen.

“...only this level, huh. Weak.”

In the corner of Yuezen’s eye, a spear-like object was vrooming through the sky, he easily dodged and cut it in half swiftly with his scimitar. In the place the spear landed, smoke started emitting and blasted the entire area with thick smoke.

“Don’t think these kinds of little tricks could work on me!”

Yuezen cried out, irritated by Ryzen for not fighting him directly. He then immediately noticed the sound of something piercing the air and dodged. It was a sharp spear with a weird contraption attached to it. The spear was thrust dozens of times while Yuezen dodged all of them, then cut off the stone made tip of the spear like butter, the spear suddenly lost control and was flung towards Yuezen, he immediately dodged to the left, thinking ‘huh don’t you know the tip is destroyed, you can’t deal damage, ha!’

Suddenly, the contraption on the spear emitted a bright red light, shining and lighting up a huge portion of the room, the sharp light then contracted and made a screeching sound.

“Oh damn it you bastard-”

Before Yuezen was able to finish his sentence and gallop back as quickly as possible, the spear exploded and a large sound of the blast was heard throughout the room. The room shining just a while ago became pitch black again while Yuezen, hurt by the explosion growled in anger as smoke emitted from his body

‘You Mongrelssss!!’

As if answering his calls, an axe appeared in front of him and was swung aiming for his head, he blocked the swing with his scimitar as well as the strong kick coming from the left side and dodging the second rapid kick aiming at his stomach. After blocking and deflecting the rapid attacks, he spun and turned around only to see two axes simultaneously swinging and hammering down his body and he tried to block them all with his scimitar. He immediately recognized the one-man attacking him after receiving a few blows, he grinned and said loudly

“Gaaaaahahahh! Not bad! I thought I knocked you down, but you came back up in no time!”

“The name is Ryzen you bastard!!”

Ryzen screamed while swinging the axes simultaneously in fluid action, he tried lowering his center of gravity, crouching and kicking Yuezen’s legs to knock him over but failed, as Ryzen was swinging his sharp axes and getting deflected, Yuezen managed to find an opening and slashed both of axes away, and kicked Ryzen in the stomach which was dodged by Ryzen who jumped into the air and side-kicked Yuezen and kicked Yuezen in the face. Yuezen quickly jumped back only to be pursued by a dashing spear coming from the sides.

“Gyyyaaaahh!!”

It was a voice of a girl growling and thrusting the spear while getting blocked by the scimitar, the moment the Yuezen repeated his previous action to the spear, attempting to destroy the tip of the spear, the spear was suddenly swung upward and clashed with the tip of the scimitar, scratching the surface of both weapons, it let out a screeching sound along with sounds of metal clashing, which quickly after Yuezen dashed forward in an attempt to thrust the scimitar towards the girl, the girl suddenly backed off before Ryzen even yelled

“MArrrrrryyy!!”

“Hrrrgaahh!!”

Swiping the spear like a circle, stopping the pursuit of Yuezen, a spinning sharp object suddenly spun and flew towards Yuezen coming from the direction of Mary backing off, with the sound of a honed object piercing the air, the object arrived at Yuezen’s side in no time, Yuezen attempted to knock it aside with the scimitar, only to slice off a wooden handle.

Upon contact, the surroundings were dyed in white, a raging roar echoed through the room and a cloud of dust fluttered from the spot.

Yuezen was once again hurt on the spot of the explosion, groaning because of the pain. He strongly glared while radiating rage at the two shadows attacking him simultaneously in rapid succession.

“GraaaahHHH!!”

Yuezen dashed while swinging his scimitar in a burst of stream, Ryzen crouched and jumped backward. In midair, he spun like a tornado while swinging his axes, colliding with Yuezen swinging his scimitar intensely. Mary checked the situation before dashing back, and pulling the trigger of the laser spear, a beam of light shined and was shot towards Yuezen, Yuezen dodged with all his might and while simultaneously blocking a kick to his legs and an axe getting thrown at him in mid-air. He dodged the beam of light and blocked the two rapid attacks, then suffered an impaling fist of rage from Ryzen, knocking him back several meters.

“Ga..AhhAHHHH”

Without giving Ryzen and Mary a time to catch their breath, Yuezen once again bolted towards both of them, while swinging his scimitar as if dancing, Ryzen dodged and spun back, did a backflip and in the previous location he was at just before the backflip, Mary ran and thrust her spear like a flash of lightning towards Yuezen, who ducked while crouching before cutting through the handle of the spear cleanly in half.

“My spear broke!”

Cried, Mary. Seeing Mary losing her weapon, Yuezen immediately dashed forward in an attempt to slash Mary, which he hesitated and jumped back when seeing Ryzen’s enraged face in midair, striking and hammering down towards Yuezen. The ground which received Ryzen’s blow directly shattered and left a huge scar on the floor. Yuezen however didn’t intend to lose this precious opportunity and charged at Ryzen while thrusting his scimitar like a spear, Ryzen knocked away the attack and blocked a kick from Yuezen while holding his axes and crossing his arms. Yuezen’s kick struck his arms, knocking him meters backward mercilessly, and immediately after Ryzen’s fall, Yuezen spared no time and sprinted towards Mary, and in front of her black shadow, he...

Slashed. The sensation of a sharp scimitar piercing, slicing up human skin, and then shattering human bones filled Yuezen up while mercilessly cutting through Mary.... Or actually

Ryzen.

Ryzen used his back to shield Mary from the attack, slowly after falling from pain, bloodlust filled the entire room...

A shadow behind Ryzen plunged herself forward, thrusting her sharp spear in Yuezen’s heart, and slowly, Yuezen started to fade away..

“GRAAAHHHH!!”

Mustering all her strength, Mary spun the spear deep inside Yuezhen’s body like a circle, and slashing his body into pieces, slashing his body which was enchanted by the legendary painting!

Yuzen cried his last breath.

“HAHAHAHAHHHHHHH!! WELL PLAYED! YOU DAMN MONGRELSSS!! GRAAAAAHHHHHHH”

Staggered, Yuezhen slowly faded into dust...

A week has passed since the battle against Yuezhen. Mary set up a grave, carved the word “Ryzen” and buried Ryzen’s Axe on top of a hill, overlooking the mogao grottoes. After mourning for him, she returned to the altar that they came here from.

Two people entered the mogao grottoes, and only one of them came out alive...

The words ‘The brave pair, Ryzen and Mary had once again discovered an ancient piece of art that would be labeled as a national treasure! China is proud!’ can be seen all over the news and newspapers. ‘Ryzen, from the legendary pair of geniuses, had died!’ Was written on the next line. At the Chinese national museum, The artwork was displayed in a glass chamber. On Mary's request, the words written on the plate of people who discovered the treasure was...

‘Ryzen and Mary.’

This, is the story of two brave adventurers who one sacrificed his life, and one who lived on, who retrieved the ancient art piece.

Love & The Grottoes

Creative Secondary School, Cheung, Haydrian – 15

One hundred years ago, a man called Yuanku Wang met a pretty girl called Xuan Zi. After a long time spent together, they became a couple.

Yuanku was a forty-year-old male who was bald, short, unattractive, had no friends, and was working hard at his awful latrine cleaning job. He had no interests or goals, and he was still unmarried at the age of forty. His parents had passed away because of hunger, since they gave all of the food to Yuanku. Yuanku learnt lots of things by himself, and he was always grateful for what he had. He had never been negative although he grew up in a very difficult environment. He was like a drop of pure water from the sky that had fallen into a swamp.

On one cold Friday, Yuanku saw a couple arguing on the street when he was on the way back home from work. Although he didn't understand what happened through the conversation, he went to provide help and comfort to the girl who had been left alone and was crying after the argument. He didn't know how to comfort a girl since he had never spoken to one, but he still tried to provide as much help as he could possibly give to her. And as they got to know each other, Yuanku offered to take her to his home for food and company.

After a pleasant night, they spent time together out at a market. Yuanku was as excited as a butterfly which had just learnt how to fly because this was his first time speaking to a woman. As the first time Yuanku had entered a relationship, he paid for all the goods that Xuan Zi bought. After that experience, he told Xuan Zi he couldn't afford more of those luxuries, but Xuan Zi was mad and decided to break up with Yuanku. Yuanku then realized that he had been tricked by this girl and he thought about how silly he was when he believed her feelings were true. He also understood why Xuan Zi argued with his partner on that random Friday.

This was the first time that Yuanku felt depressed and had a thought of ending his life; he had lost all savings he had, and he owned nothing. Now he was desperate for money in order to live, he was just like a man finding water in the desert in order to survive. He bought some alcohol and got drunk on the street; after this he laid down in a stupor. When he woke, a homeless person was crouched over him, and this person brought water and some food from the bin for him. His name was Tao Bao, and he told Yuanku that he still had a long way to go and not to ever stop and quit life. He took himself as an example: even a homeless person like me has so much faith. Tao Bao gave a hint to Yuanku about finding his purpose in life. The hint would take Yuanku to southeast Dunhuang.

Following the directions given by Tao Bao, he started his journey to the southeast of Dunhuang. On the way to the destination, he had to pass through the Gobi Desert, but he was tired and thirsty as his water had run out. Under the sun, he was a piece of meat that was placed on a heated pan. He fainted from exhaustion. Suddenly, he was in a dream with thousands of Buddhas; he awoke to see that he was on the edge of a cliff. There were dark caves next to the cliff, and as it was almost night time, he needed to find a shelter so he decided to explore the caves.

As he entered the cave, he saw lots of wall paintings inside, and caves were linked together with lots of dusty corridors. There was food, water, and reading materials in the cave. Although it was limited, it was enough for Yanku to stay alive. As he analyzed the paintings on the wall, he realized that there were lots of Buddhas in them, and this reminded him of the dream that brought him to the cliff with thousands of Buddhas. He believed that this was where Tao Bao had told him to find, and he started to read the materials on Buddhism. Within a day, he knew that he was going to become a monk.

Yuanku wanted to recruit pupils, so he went out of the cave and meditated in the desert. He meditated in the desert for a week, but still no one had passed him because of the harshness of the Gobi Desert.

Wu Long Chan was a brave and tough man. At the age of 5, he was a taekwondo black belt; at the age of 7, he hurt a bully in the school; at the age of 12, he became a bully in the school; at the age of 15, he got kicked by the school; finally, he was kicked out onto the street by his family. One evening, he saw Tao Bao on the street, and Tao Bao gave him the same hints that were given to Yuanku.

A month later, Wu Long Chan arrived through the Gobi Desert and saw Yuanku meditating in the sand. He noticed that Yuanku was a monk, so he woke him from meditating and reminded that he needs to shave his hair and moustache as it had been growing for a month. After that Yuanku asked why Wu Long had arrived. Through the conversation, they knew that they both were given hints by Tao Bao; therefore, Wu Long joined Yuanku. It was a great feeling because Yuanku had recruited his first pupil.

They both started to recruit and spread Buddhism together by meditating in the desert. After a year, they had 100 people meditating next to them; after 5 years, they had 1000 people following them.

After 5 years of recruiting, they had successfully spread Buddhism in Dunhuang and lots of people had joined. They extended the cave and constructed more new areas to meditate around and inside the caves. They started to trade with others as the southeast of Dunhuang was an important place on the Silk Road. And with the success of this, Yuanku decided to name the cave the *Mogao Grottoes* because they were so unique and special because they were built next to the cliff which had many natural caves; further, *Mogao* means peerless in Chinese.

Wu Long Chan was a changed man and provided help to Yuanku each day; he always protected and followed Yuanku, and he learnt lots of things alongside Yuanku. Wu Long became a better person.

They gathered lots of resources and materials through trades with others, and Yuanku decided to draw the murals from the wall and transform them into paintings. 'It is much easier to keep and store them this way', he thought.

During the night, a cold wind blew and there were several monks who were murdered. Yuanku was shocked since no one was able to enter the cave except for the monks who knew where the secret entrance was. Everybody was panicking and praying for Buddha to protect them.

The night after, Yuanku had a dream that Buddha was telling him who the betrayer was, but right at the moment when the Buddha started to speak, he was woken by a scream. He was shocked and frustrated, but he quickly ran out of the room and woke everyone up. They all ran and located the room where the scream came from. When they arrived to that room, they saw Wu Long Chan had captured the murderer, but it was too late. The monk who screamed had died. They didn't kill the murderer, but they kicked him out of the cave and forced upon him a life of service to others. All the monks had settled down and tried to forget their worries.

After this incident, Yuanku Wang decided to have a little chat with his best pupil Wu Long Chan. Yuanku understood that he was becoming weaker as the time passes, but he was ever more grateful too. He knew that this was the time when a generation passed to the next generation, so he brought Wu Long Chan to the cliff where Yuanku started his journey. Yuanku talked about their glories. It was very meaningful to Yuanku, but Wu Long Chan didn't listen. His eyes became dark and he grabbed Yuanku's neck and said, 'Why did you get all the fame but I did not. I am your best follower. I helped you to fight those who challenged you, and I helped you to manage these old dusty caves. I helped a lot, but no one noticed and or even appreciated me. You earned a lot from those trades, but I did not get what I deserved. Without me, you were nothing'. YuanKu, with tears in his eyes, tried to continue, 'I was about to let you be...'

Before Yuanku finished his sentence, Wu Long Chan said, 'Now, you will end at the place where you started', and he then threw Yuanku off the cliff and went back to the grottoes. On seeing the others, he cried with exaggerated emotions and announced that Yuanku had died. As Wu Long Chan was the best pupil, he became the new leader.

Wu Long Chan suddenly turned into a wealthy person, he wasted lots of materials and was a brutal leader. He treated the pupils like slaves; he was so selfish. He demanded his pupils do disgusting things, and he didn't respect them. As Wu Long Chan became a tyrant, the pupils started to not follow him and some of them quit.

On a hot summers day, Wu Long Chan led a large group of his pupils to do a trade with those from the West. Under the hot sun in the desert, Wu Long Chan commanded his pupils use cloth materials to keep the sunlight off him, and the pupils suffered from the unbearable heat. On the way to the trade destination, the pupils saw a cliff and went to settle down for a while since they were very tired. Wu Long Chan tried to stop them but they were so exhausted that they needed to rest. Wu Long Chan became more frustrated as the time went on, and he was afraid that his lie would be revealed since Yuanku's corpse was still down below the cliff. As the group rested, one of the monks close to Wu Long Chan screamed in horror since he saw Yunaku's corpse. Wu Long's emotions exploded. Everyone was stunned and went to stare over the cliff. The monks grabbed Wu Long and led him towards the edge of the cliff.

Memories

Creative Secondary School, Djeu, Florence – 16

Darkness. Leo Barren woke up with layers of darkness upon him. He barely had any memories about anything. His identity, voices, the scent of the desert, the night sky; they all seemed so connected to him, yet he couldn't recall a single detail about any of them. It was almost like he woke up from nothing, and came from nowhere. The only thing he was familiar with was the hollow space without brilliance, as well as caves, the single memory that gave him some ideas about the world. The darkness and atmosphere he was in right now reminded him of the grottoes, the only place where the unknown feels safe. Unexpectedly, a faint light broke the darkness. Confused, Leo slowly crawled towards the only source of light, realizing it was a heavily damaged camera with its screen flickering. Leo could barely tell what it was trying to show, when words started to appear one by one on the camera screen.

“Remember”

“Who”

“You”

“Are”

The camera completely shut down after its last words. Leo thought it was strange, but didn't put much thought into it as he had better things to worry about. With the camera being the only object around, Leo decided to bring it with him just in case. After hanging the camera around his neck, he stood up trying to learn his surroundings while his fingers led his way, feeling a path out of the darkness. He felt walls, the sensations were again strangely cold yet unbelievably familiar. He traveled and traveled, moving forward was his only choice, or at least, it was something he had been doing since...since when? Leo couldn't remember why he was moving forward, but it felt right to him. Minutes went by, or even hours; Leo couldn't keep track of time as if it had become surreal. As the darkness continued, they gradually transformed into waves of despair engulfing his consciousness. He was almost convinced that the overwhelming sensation would be the end of him, when the echoing of a tender yet lifeless voice pulled him back to reality.

“Barren, in order to fulfil a purpose, one must learn to let go of the burdens. Some memories are not worth clinging on to. All you have to do is to let go.”

“Letting...go” Leo mumbled. Even the words coming out of his own mouth were beyond Leo's ken. He decided to stop. He knew something wasn't right, but couldn't tell what exactly the problem was. So, he dug. He dug through the memories as that was the only way out the never ending loop of darkness. The moment Leo closed his eyes to recall, his life flashed in front of his eyes. It was overwhelming, fascinating, so abstract yet so familiar. He felt light, as if weights were slowly dropping off of his body. He saw a light, trying to shine through his eyelids, playfully inviting him to open his eyes. He did. A sacred land then heaved into his sight. The land was the complete opposite of where he was a second ago, with everything being in the color white, an almost two-dimensional world that only had black outlines of simple objects. As Leo's memory slowly recovered, he started to soliloquize without putting much thought into it.

“I remember the night sky.”

As if he was heard, the white sky shifted into a calming shade of dark blue. Innumerable milky ways emerged, adding layers of color to the already sumptuous sky. Meteors struck and the Polaris stared down as Leo had his breath taken away from the sudden change into this utopia like world. The forlorn moon hung, watching over the mythical land that had appeared just from a memory of the only man standing.

“I remember the grottoes.”

“But I don't remember why?”

It was the grottoes located right in front of him, like fragments of a replica formed from his memory. Heavy footsteps of the lost broke the silence and made their way into the grottoes. What Leo didn't notice, however, was the sky slowly being shrouded in a bloody shade of red.

“I feel like I've known this place...” Leo murmured in a monotone voice.

More was uncovered with each step Leo took. He saw moths, soaring through the space accompanied by dust floating within the emptiness. The view was somewhat peaceful, and much brighter than the dark pit Leo was in for a suffocating long period of time. As he explored, the moths started to surround him, as if he were a source of light; as if he were a saviour they had longed for. His fingers were possessed by curiosity, and they slowly but steadily moved towards one of the moths, and, without a warning, the moth vanished into the atmosphere. Just like that, the fleeting life had vanished. He felt everything when the moth vanished from his fingers, as if the moth had finally achieved something so grand that it was worth the sacrifice of its soul.

It vanished, but with a ray of hope.

Leo noticed that something had lit up in the corner of his eye.

It was a mural, glowing while it revealed a story.

The mural looked ancient; however, the vivid colors did not seem to have been affected by the passing of time. Moths could be seen painted in the mural, flying towards a source of light: mysterious and irresistible. The scenario depicted in the mural is identical with everything he had seen up until this point. The dazzling stars, the majestic grottoes and the moths. The only thing that was missing was Leo Barren himself. Something else caught his eyes while he was admiring the mural, something being some sort of poem handwritten neatly beside the mural. It was titled "*Long Lost Dream*"

Long Lost Dream

You're like a long-lost dream

That I had failed to recognize

Whispers deep in mind

About how promises fly

Soaring through the scarlet sky

Lost its faith in lawful lies

Breathing, grieving, everlasting

Promises never to be seen

Believing, consuming, sacrificing

Wandering in my dream.

The exact moment Leo finished reading the piece of text, the silence of the grottoes was transformed. The moths drawn in the mural came to life, scrambled out of the wall all at once, they all flew to the direction which led to the exit that Leo had entered from. Leo quickly followed the eclipse of moths, only to discover how the gorgeous night sky had been completely replaced by something between the hue of vermillion and scarlet. As the moths reached closer to the sky, they vanished; the despair within them consumed the body of the poor souls, melting into dark drops of black. It rained as more moths reached the end of their fragile life. But instead of clear droplets of water, it was this muddy and glutinous sort of drops falling from the polluted sky. Leo stood there, witnessing the tragedy. He wanted to move, but he was so petrified he couldn't even look away. The reality shifted into despair, exactly as the poem had said. As the disgusting drops of black hit his body, the despair infected Leo, darkened the sky, and distorted Leo's cognition of everything he had remembered so far. As despair took advantage of him, it slowly revealed the remaining memories of the bloody truth.

It was one of the most peaceful nights.

Leo Barren had finally made it into a well-known competition after years of training. It was his dream to become a photographer, to capture the beauty of nature and share it with the world. The competition was a golden opportunity that he finally achieved, and he couldn't hide his excitement to finally have the world to see his work and his perception of the world. Leo had everything planned out; he was going to capture the night sky in the desert, as well as the Mogao grottoes and rolling dunes merging as one with the night sky. He had planned everything. The exact time, angle, and date needed to capture the blood moon hanging right on top of the grottoes. He made sure the weather was suitable, the sky had to be cloudless and stars perfectly aligned to get the perfect photograph. "*Long Lost Dream, that will be the name of the photo.*" A grin appeared on Leo's face while he carefully planned the shot.

Time flew by, and he finally reached his destination. The desert was desolate, and the contrast of the starry sky and the grottoes made it the perfect location for Leo's photograph. The blood moon hung, the stars were all being cooperative, and Leo even got the angle he wanted on his first try. Everything was going according to plan.

"Now I just have to wait for the moon to hang right on top of the grottoes."

Leo admired how the landscape and a man-made ancient structure formed into a piece of art, it was something he wanted to capture a long time ago.

“Dad, Mom, today will finally be the day that I share the love and memories you gave to me with the world.”

Leo’s father was an astronomer and his mother was a geographer. They were a perfect match, and Leo could have sworn that he was the happiest child in the entire world. They would always bring Leo everywhere to explore the beauty of nature. They would go stargazing; they would lie down and feel the temperature of the land: it was the happiest moment of his life. Leo could still remember how his father would not stop talking about the night sky and how his mother would do the same when it came to the deserted lands. Leo made a promise with his parents that one day when he grew up, he could capture the most beautiful photo that his parents had ever seen. But, one unfortunate day, both of Leo’s parents died while exploring the Mogao grottoes. Nobody knew why, even doctors could not tell the cause of death, yet the only thing that was unusual about that day was the blood moon.

Leo held his tears in while thinking about the past, and forced himself to focus on taking the photo.

The moon came really close to the exact center of the frame. Leo could feel his legs shaking and hands covered in sweat. Nothing could go wrong, and he only had one chance.

One chance to share his memories with the world.

One chance to achieve his lifelong dream.

One chance to fulfil a promise.

The blood moon reached the center.

It's time...

Leo couldn’t move his fingers.

Almost like he had been cursed, his legs were moving on their own. He moved across the sand, and, just like that, Leo approached the grottoes and plunged into the darkness with his camera still in his hand. He couldn’t think, he couldn’t make a sound, he couldn’t do anything. Without giving Leo extra time to comprehend, a strong gravitational force pulled him into the grottoes. The last thing he knew was a feeling of nausea before collapsing and closing his eyes forever. His memories ended here.

“No...That couldn’t have been!” Leo remembered what had happened: he was dead.

Leo wanted to give up. He felt fear, stronger than ever. It was like the more he tried to remember, the more pain grew inside of him.

He then ran.

He ran not knowing why.

“I’m in a simple nightmare, it’s just... just a stupid... dream...”

He ran to escape from his thoughts.

“Can I be dead...”

He ran until he couldn’t anymore.

He ran as a form of denial.

The eyelids of Leo grew heavier and heavier as he sprinted further down the path into the unknown. He was really close to giving in to the warmth, when a sharp pain in his head snapped him back.

It was then when he realized, he was once again trapped in the plight of the never-ending darkness.

"...This is outrageous."

Leo gripped his fist.

"I was so close to achieving my dream...I had it all. It was supposed to be the best day of my life."

The expression on his face grew gloomier as he spoke.

"Why? How did this happen?"

He had had enough.

"WHY DID IT HAVE TO BE ME? WHY MUST IT HAPPEN ON THIS DAY? IT'S NOT FAIR, IT'S NOT FAIR, IT'S NOT FAIR! I HAD MY LIFE ALL PLANNED OUT. IT SHOULD NOT HAVE ENDED LIKE THIS!"

Anger took over him. He yelled, he kicked and screamed like a beast out of control.

"IF IT WEREN'T FOR MEMORY OF MY PARENTS; IF IT WEREN'T FOR THE SAKE OF A DREAM, I MAY STILL BE ALIVE, I...I would..."

"No...I can't feel that way..."

Anger was followed by the sensation of guilt.

"I'm sorry..."

"All I ever wanted was to keep the memories...forever..."

"I'm willing to do anything, please...anyone? Bring me back to life, I only need five minutes...it's enough...please..."

He knew that he would never have the chance to relive his memories or even to share his memories with anyone. It was over.

It was the worst feeling he'd ever had. The feeling of depression. The feeling of sorrow taking each and every single one of his scenes; his heart being wrapped around and gripped tightly by pricks covered with venom every time he breathed. He was too weak to speak, or even to reach out. That suffocation made him so weak that he could not even carry the weight of his own body. He laid there, feeling the temperature of the cold floor, knowing how it is not even close to how cold he was inside. He wanted to scream due to the pain, but when he opened his mouth, nothing came out. The only warmth he felt was the warmth coming from his eyes. A teardrop followed another while Leo drowned in the emotions disguised in tears. It was terrible, like being stabbed in the heart, with nothing he could do to stop the pain. Sobbing because of the shape of a dream; suffocating because of the layout of a life fading away because of the memories behind a promise.

"Leo? Son..."

Leo thought he was hallucinating when he heard the voice of his dad. Then, he realized that the sounds were coming from the camera he had with him.

"Can you see us through the camera? We recorded this because your mother and I have decided to explore the legendary Mogao grottoes tomorrow! Isn't that exciting? We have heard rumors about the curse in the blood moon and thought it would be perfect for an adventure, but it's far too dangerous to bring you with us. But, don't you worry, we are going to record the whole process so you don't miss out! We must get going, but we'll see you in the next video!"

"Leo...Son..."

The next video played by itself. It was his mother speaking.

"Something weird is happening, we think we might be in danger. Your dad has just fainted and I'm not feeling too well...So listen carefully for me, okay? This is something your dad and I wanted to tell you all along. The view where the sky meets the land, is where history was made, and where your future lies. Capture the moments in the

past, but leave it only in the camera. Always remember who you are, Leo, you are the one who defines who you are, not your memories. We love you and we know you have a kind heart, but we want you to be able to live your own life and find your own path. So, stay strong and find yourself...not for the sake of anyone, but for you, and only you."

The video ended.

Leo finally understood.

He never had to fulfil any sort of obligation, the only one he should be living for, is himself. The sorrow and anger made him mistake the purpose of life with a simple "promise" and a "dream". Life was to explore, to learn and to move forward instead of living in guilt and a promise. Taking photos was never his only chance and purpose of his life. He enjoyed nature and the time he had with his family, and it was time to let go.

Leo felt relieved while the feeling of acceptance had finally woken him up.

"You've survived the ordeal. You have proven yourself by making it through the five stages of grief and not giving into temptation. You now have two choices, either to forget everything and move onto your next life, or to keep all your memories and live within them forever. It is your choice."

"I choose to live in my memories."

"I see, you have chosen to remember instead of to forget. It is more of a blessing to fade away in ignorance than to carry memories along your way - don't you understand?"

"I do. But, I will not allow myself to escape anymore. I am myself, and I should have been the one to choose what path I wanted to take. I am done regretting everything in my life, I want to start over, and appreciate all the details in my past. Only reliving my old life will help me understand my true self. Even if that means to relive all the pain, I am willing to."

"Your wish is granted."

Somewhere in the grottoes, lived a soul trapped in a statue. The soul could only relive its life over and over. Some say it was a curse; some say the soul was unfortunate, but I know it is lucky because it found its true purpose. Why do I know this? Because I am that soul, and my name is Leo Barren.

Artifacts of The Mogao Grottoes

Creative Secondary School, Fong, Darryl – 15

It all started long, long ago. When I first came to life about a thousand years ago. You might be wondering, am I immortal? Or am I a god or something similar? In this case, both of those answers were wrong. I am a painting. Yes, a painting, monks have painted on me to show their emotions and thoughts using their paint made out of berries and grass. I remember I was once beautiful and elegant, hanging above the candles, showing all the glory of being a piece of artwork. As time passed, the grotto became less and less popular and the people I see slowly disappeared from this grotto. As time went on, less and less people came to visit the grotto. I remember the day where there were no more human beings in the grotto. It was that day, the day I started to lose hope.

Just like other pieces of fine art, sculptures, architecture, we were all abandoned. And from there on, we started to grow independent where we wouldn't require the help from humans. We learned to dust ourselves off, learnt to paint ourselves and even repair the damages from before. Even though we were living in a cave, we do not care about the darkness unlike the humans. From what humans might describe, a tomb might be dark and dusty, but as someone who lives inside the tomb, I can tell you it's the direct opposite. As we live in the dark for a long time, our bodies would automatically mutate to adapt to the surroundings, which explains why we now get night vision and a stronger smell.

Life might be great right now, but we will never forget the day humans left us to rot in the grotto. Of course, humans would never abandon their own kind since they think of themselves as the most intelligent and precious creatures on the planet. Little do they know, this vast planet is crawling with life. As Tamara Ireland Stone once said “I think the world would be a better place if people stopped every once in a while and questioned everything they thought they knew.” Well I guess she's not wrong after all, since people nowadays just throw away the old stuff and replace it with newer substitutes. Have humans ever thought of our feelings, the feeling of being abandoned? Well simply they have not, otherwise we would still be under the care of human beings.

But the past is already the past, and there is nothing we can do about it. On the other hand, we could always prepare for the future and not let the same fate happen to the other precious creatures all around us. This is why Pipa, one of the first paintings in the grotto, decided to launch an attack on the humans. This plan was made very carefully to ensure no mistakes or accidents will happen during salvation day, we were briefed again and again of the smallest details in the whole plan. This conversation happened for almost a decade as we also predicted all the scenarios that could happen, funny how a painting's mind could have a higher capacity than a regular human's mind.

Well now the plan was finished, all we had to do was find a way out of here. We tried finding holes or tunnels in the grotto, but it was fully sealed shut by the lasting sand storms out there. Eventually everything seemed impossible and all hope was lost. Until that one moment that would change everything, our lives, our future and our destiny.

There was first a creek, then a glimpse of light. Then the whole sand wall got barged open. In came four people with crowbars and pickaxes. Turns out people finally discovered this hidden grotto and decided to open the door to the tomb. We were then carried onto the back of the truck, and that's where these plans started to come into place. We are now on the back of the truck, and we are preparing to hijack the four nasty human beings in front of us. This might be the last time you'll ever hear from me, or this just might be the beginning to the rise of art. Until then, wish me luck!

New Tales of the Mogao Grottoes

Creative Secondary School, Fung, Venus – 15

Qiang was a timid boy, he was always quiet, shy, and didn't know how to communicate with others. This made him have an unhappy school life because he had no friends. In fact, he wished to have close friends who could have lunch together with him, solve the difficult mathematics questions together, and go back home to talk about the interesting things that happened at school.

One day he was startled when the teacher banged on the blackboard and shouted his name for the answer but the only word that came out of his mouth was "Mummy". The class laughed, the teacher took him out of the classroom and punished him with detention that day.

The teacher punished him and told him to submit a report on the Mogao Grottoes. Qiang was instantly bored but he knew he needed to finish his homework about the history of a Chinese historical building he didn't care about. As he started to flip the pages in the book, he felt electricity from the pages, he felt he wasn't controlling his hand. The light of the room suddenly shut off; all things became silent. The book started to glow, Qiang threw it away in horror, sweating, his heart kept pounding in his chest. Afraid, he rushed to the door but a force pulled him back onto the floor. Before him, he saw a man in burnt orange cloth. He was bald with a string of wooden beads around his head. The man simply smiled and bowed to Qiang. "You are going to help me, all the gods are gone."

Qiang wondered if he was in a movie or still dreaming. He pinched himself,

"Yeah, I am not dreaming. What do you want from me?" he asked the monk.

"You are coming with me, my friend, back a thousand years ago to find the lost gods."

A sudden hole came out from the book, and the pair were sucked into it. A second later, Qiang saw before him the enormous dusty building full of sand. Qiang kept coughing; he couldn't adapt to the environment and the sand kept blowing into his mouth. The monk gave him a cloth to cover it and slowly took him inside the caves. The darkness of the cave made Qiang feel scared. Standing behind the monk, Qiang was led into a cave that had a few candles to light up the space.

The monk looked at him and said "Don't be scared there's no monster or ghost, the gods will protect you. Oh, I forgot to introduce myself, my name is Wang Yuanku, you can just call me Wang."

Qiang smiled, "My name is Qiang."

Wang started to tell Qiang why he was brought to the Mogao Grottoes "You are the special one who was chosen by the book. I'm here to help you to get through all the obstacles you have been through. I know you do not get along with your classmates really well because of your personality, so I need you to overcome your fear through this journey. Let me tell you what happened, I have lived here for 10 years. My work here is to clean, decorate the cave, meditate and worship the gods. Nothing really special. Just a month ago, I observed a new cave. There are many ancient manuscripts, silk banners and paintings, fine silk embroideries, and other rare textiles, all the things inside are even older than me. From my observation, the things inside are built and made by the family of Northern Wei and Northern Zhou. The things I mentioned just now like art pieces and sculptures are stored inside as most people

from ancient times wanted to keep their valuable objects safe. These sculptures and paintings were used to worship the gods to show respect and thanks. Our challenge is to find the god that was missing from one of the art pieces.”

Qiang started to become interested in what Wang was saying. Wang suddenly stopped and quietly moved to another room which was dark and silent. Qiang felt so scared that he hid behind Wang’s back immediately and followed him step by step. Wang felt his fear and encouraged him to hold a candle, leading him to search for the missing god. While walking, Wang kept on comforting him by putting his arm around Qiang’s shoulder and talking softly “Don’t worry there would be nothing scary here, let me talk more about the cave while walking”. Qiang slowly let go of his fear and he thought it was similar to listening to a tour guide.

All of a sudden, something flew over their heads. Qiang screamed. He couldn't believe what he had just seen, he squatted down and muttered “You tricked me... there are ghosts in here.”

Wang realized what they were. He quickly pulled Qiang up and held his hands. “They’re not ghosts – look! It’s the missing gods from the artwork!” Wang tried to use his hand to catch the lost several times but he failed. While Wang wanted to give up, Qiang took his bag and tried to find something. He took all the things out of his bag such as an old notebook, some beads, and water, and picked up a wooden stick nearby and used the string inside Wang’s back to wrap the bag and the wooden stick up.

Wang didn't get what Qiang was doing and said “Do you know taking others’ bags without asking is rude?” Qiang finally realized that sometimes he would be misunderstood by people because he never explained clearly. Qiang didn’t ask for Wang’s permission and took his bag, which he realized was actually impolite behavior. Although he meant well, he just wanted to catch the missing artwork as soon as possible, he still needed to inform Wang. Qiang replied, “I know but if I don’t move faster the god will vanish so the drawing and statue will always have missing pieces.” He tried his own made net to see if it worked. He ran forward and tried to catch the missing artwork. Qiang held the wooden stick tightly and flung the bag out. Within a few minutes, all the missing artwork was caught inside the bag. Wang immediately used the remaining string to tighten the bag, which became heavy and bulky.

Wang looked at him with awe, Qiang smiled and quickly called Wang to take him to the cave that originally stored the artwork as Qiang was afraid the gods would escape again if they don’t return them as soon as possible. So both of them ran to the Library cave to put the missing pieces back. “Woohoo, all things back to their own place” Wang yelled.

“Thanks a lot, you are such a good tour guide. This is such an amazing journey that I ever had. You make me believe that I can do it. I am now a strong and brave person, and I am so glad that I finally get a new friend. I also gain a deeper knowledge about the Mogao Caves and I can finally start to enjoy history.” Qiang said

The drawing of the “Daung Huang fly” shone and started to bring Qiang back to the modern-day.

The last sentence that Qiang left to Wang is “Bye, hope to see you again.”

Wang yelled, “Same here.”

When Qiang was back to school, he immediately started his project. For his project, he did an excellent job, his teacher and classmates were impressed with his work. He became interested in the history of China after experiencing travel in a book, especially on Duang Huan. He also improved his self-esteem. And more importantly, Qiang can make a lot of friends now. Some classmates asked him about the history homework, Qiang taught them thoroughly which made him very popular. One day he went to the library. He was obsessed with reading a book about Duang Huan. Suddenly the monk popped out, Qiang rubbed his eyes to see clearer and he saw Wang again “It’s me, nice to see you again.” and took Qiang to travel to another place. To where? This would be another story.

Remembering

Creative Secondary School, Hui, Hannah – 15

I open my eyes. A bright white blaze shines right through my dilated pupils. I shut them close, still vividly seeing the shadow of the sun. Where am I? How did I get here? I start to panic. Am I supposed to be somewhere? I opened my eye once again, this time, turning to my left to avoid direct contact with the sun.

I don't remember anything.

Placing my right hand beside my left arm against the rough dry sand, I gather my strength to support myself up. Now all I see is tan sand. Where am I? I slowly start to recall the events that happened before I ended up here in the middle of the unknown.

My mind is blank.

Panicking, I stand up. "Ouch", I whisper. Why does my chest hurt? I lift my shirt up to see a big open wound. "How...how did I get this?" I say very softly as if someone else were here with me. I look around once more. A duffle bag is laying five feet away from me. I press against my wound, trying to suppress the pain, walk over there, pick the bag up, and start digging through it. A canteen half-full, a box of matches, a colt M1903 pistol, a compass, a Miaodao — a sabre with a narrow blade — I keep on digging and digging until I reach the bottom. I hear something crackle at the bottom of the bag and feel around to take out what looks like a map. A map? Out of curiosity, I open the creased paper and study it.

The map is handwritten, so part of the words written and places marked are not clear. "DUNHUANG" is marked in the middle right of the cave. "GAO AVES" I read one of the places circled multiple times out loud. Then I see mountain-like figures drawn beside the name. The two places are linked with a crooked line. What does "Gao Aves" mean? Where am I on the map? How am I supposed to get back to where I'm supposed to be? So many questions come across my mind, but as much as I want answers, all I have in the middle of nowhere is the duffle bag and the map.

As confused as I am, I know I have to get to the bottom of all of this.

To my understanding, "Gao" means high and "Aves" are birds. I think to myself, maybe if I'm lucky enough to find this place, presumably a mountain, I'll have birds to keep me company until I find out what happened. The thought of not being alone brightens me up and I start to plan my way out of the desert and into the mountains.

I take the compass from the duffle bag and lay it out on the sand along with the crinkled map. An "X" is marked on the route between Dunhuang and Gao Aves, southeast to the mountains. Pressing my luck, I have no choice but to execute with my absurd and unthinkable plan. Everything starts to come together, I squeal like a child reuniting with his military father, and I embark on the venture to the mountains.

When I stand up, a drop of blood drips down my shirt. I am still bleeding. Still holding my hand down against my chest, I fumble around the duffle bag in search for something to wrap myself with. I find a roll of field dressing and a bottle of alcohol in the black bag. I open the bottle and pour alcohol onto myself. The pain is unbearable. I wrap the dressing around my chest, securing it with a reef knot.

I lift the unimaginably heavy duffle bag, swing it across my back, and hold my compass tightly in my right hand and the map in my left. Now, I head towards the mountains.

"Northwest." Adrenaline rushes through my body. I cannot tell whether it is the pain or nervousness or purely excitement. I walk and walk until my feet feel numb. Not long after an estimated of six miles, green trees start to appear.

“Is this it?” I mumble.

Letters are carved onto the front of an enormous rock. The words are not neat yet I am able to make out the words “Mogao Caves”. This name looks familiar, I’ve seen it somewhere. I think to myself. I stare at it for far more than a minute. Then, I suddenly realize. “The map! The map!” Aggressively, I open the map that has been soaked with my palm sweat and start to study it once more. “Mogao Caves, not a mountain, just a number of deserted caves.” I told myself with disappointment.

Deserted, just like I am. I have no memory.

The entrance of the caves is before my very eyes, so I step into the sacred territory, and into the one of temples.

The temple is enormous. The end of the corridor goes on without an end from where I am standing. I look around the place in awe.

A ceiling mural stares at me from above with hundreds and thousands of pairs of eyes. I lift my head up as high as I can, and stare back into each pair of eyes. The mural has countless paintings, with what seems like a story in each undivided section. The mural stories do not appear to have a clear theme, for this reason, I am not sure what to think of them.

Looking closely, I see a group of men in shining silver armour. Some hold swords in one hand and shields in the other, while some carry both, riding on tall mighty horses. On their heads they all wear helmets, covering their face, making them almost identical to one another. “They must be fighting for their country.” I take a guess.

There is something familiar with this story.

The stories have no clear boundaries in between. Yet, out of millions of artworks, this is the one that catches my attention. I wander further down the hallway.

Paintings and statues line up against the walls. I take a look of each and every piece of artwork, each drawn or carved in exquisite detail. The way a girl’s hair waves along the wind and along the trees, the irregular pattern leaves falling off a tree creates, the manner of a boy grooming his horse. Looking at the beautifully made artworks, I find myself studying each piece of artwork carefully, deliberately lingering between the masterpieces. Until I stumble upon this painting.

The painting has pretty much everything the painted story in the ceiling mural has — men in armour, but this time in a darker, duller grey. There are more men, in fact, an army of soldiers, running towards the enemy’s direction, hungry for blood. All of the soldiers look the same.

A hear a voice. A voice in my head telling me to look closer as if the longer I look, the more details I will see. So, I look into the artwork once more, this time with my undivided focus. I pay attention to the men in the background, and discover something I hadn’t noticed just now — man in just a plain white shirt. What is he doing on the battlefield? He can be killed any moment.

Suddenly, a picture flashes through my mind, like a memory. Then, it disappears.

I see myself, in a white shirt, on that very battlefield. Baffled, I look around the corners trying to find a name of the artwork.

Dunhuang War. It writes

“I don’t understand!” I mutter confusedly. Everything feels strange but this name sounds familiar.

I walk until the end of the hallway. Mini figures are standing still on a table. I squint my eyes trying to see what the figures are, but the limited sunlight makes it especially difficult to make out what is right in front of me.

I pick up the tiny sculpture, but my hand does not touch it. I attempt to pick it up again, but it slipped and dropped to the ground with a loud thud.

That's off. I think to myself. Is this a dream? I feel light-headed. I put my hand against the wall seeking support only to see it go right through it.

What is happening? I have to get out of here.

I turn around and take a step forward but a voice stops me. "Wait!" it says. Terrified, I turn around hesitantly. "Follow me." It is a man. Tall, with a full-grown beard. Not knowing what to do, I have no choice but to turn around.

I follow right behind him back to the table where the sculptures sit and make a right turn. There is a door. He turns the knob and opens it. My heart is beating out of my chest.

Who is he? Why am I here? What is behind the door? I have so many questions.

Three other men appear at the door. They speak like they have been awaiting my arrival. "I see you have finally found us." One of them says. "Don't be afraid, you are safe here. We will explain everything." The man who brought me here starts speaking, "You have come to the right place. I doubt you remember anything, but you died in the Dunhuang War. And this is the place where soldiers' souls gather. You are now one of us."

Hearing this, I am not sure what to feel. Memories come rushing back. Dunhuang War.

Now I remember, I remember everything. A sense of relief comes over me.

"Look, kid." he says in a deep and solemn voice.

"I know this is a lot to take in. Death is very painful. It eats us up slowly from the inside out from the day we were born. Until one day, when we're not careful, we fall into the trap that has been set up for us all our lives.

I fell into this trap once. It broke me, but it also built me up. It brought me here — home."

This is true. Death is inevitable, no matter how far or how fast we run from it, it will eventually find its way back to us, as though it longs to be with us.

Remembering was too painful. Unbearable. That was why memories of the war were obliterated from my mind when I died.

I understand now. I understand my story. Once a soldier in Dunhuang. Now a soul in the Mogao Caves.

I look around the room. Pictures of young soldiers are hung up on the walls, adding colour to the rather dull and uninteresting hole. I let out a sigh, a breath of relief.

I'm on the other side now, patiently waiting for my brothers to come home

I guess all I can do is wait for the others to call this home.

The Dweller

Creative Secondary School, Kwai, Aaren – 16

The Mogao Grottoes were a peaceful place with mythical creatures and humans living in harmony. Night time didn't exist in the grottoes. The weather was always pleasant and the air always smelt fresh. However, villagers and creatures started to disobey God, doing what they were told not to do. They no longer lived in peace. One day, God punished all the mortals on earth and unleashed the Dweller from the darkness of hell - the beast that even demons feared. The Dweller was sent from the depths of the caves, spreading darkness everywhere it went. This is how The Dweller created night.

Of course, God wasn't that cruel. He knew that The Dweller would wipe out the entire population on earth, so he granted powers to the only person that obeyed God's will, The Wok. He was a strong warrior with a pure heart. God granted him the ancient pearl from heaven, and gifted it to him as a necklace which gave him power to become immortal.

The Wok didn't want the world to be engulfed in darkness, so he fought The Dweller with all he had. But he was not strong enough; he was defeated and locked up in the darkness of the Dweller's cave. Due to his immortality, he had to burn in the eternal flame, forever. After the loss of The Wok, The Dweller went back in the cave because the strongest warrior was already defeated by him, and he allowed the mortals only 12 hours of light each day. He stayed in the Mogao caves and hibernated for hundreds of years until now.

After years and years, and the passing of many generations, the villagers gradually moved to other places to live, where they were safe because they still feared the Mogao Grottoes, along with the beasts and demons inside the cave. They were aware of the story of The Dweller capturing The Wok, the strongest warrior that ever existed. Although his story wasn't proven to be real, people still feared it.

The story remained a myth until a young, brave boy was born. He was fascinated by the story so he kept on training to be stronger. He made a commitment that he would prove the story of the Wok was real. He grew up to be a charming teenager who is fearless and would do anything to defeat The Dweller in the darkness and save the noble warrior who sacrificed himself for the villagers. He started his searching journey when he was 17 years old. Before he went off to the unknown, he renamed himself John Xina to represent strength and bravery.

He gathered all his belongings, along with his favourite weapon, the war flail, which metal spikes around with chains attached to it. And the dangerous unplanned journey had begun.

After 6 months of searching the Mogao Grottoes, there were still no traces of the Dweller at all. But in those months, Xina has met a lot of mythical creatures and demons. He fought them and got stronger after every fight. He learnt the habits of the monsters and how they fought, so he could counter all the attacks from them. After fighting all these monsters, he had more hope that the story of the Dweller and the Wok was real. During his journey, Xina encountered a new mythical creature he has never seen before. It was looked like a tiger, but it was friendly. Surprisingly, it saved Xina's life from one of the demons. Therefore, Xina named it Zhong and tamed it. They discovered a lot of new places together and fought different monsters. But, little did they know, this was just the beginning of the long journey.

They kept on searching and never gave up. One day, they stumbled into a part of the caves they had never seen, and they saw an ancient temple in the rock.

"What was that? Where are we?" Xina said to himself.

Both Zhong and Xina walked in slowly and carefully, in position, getting ready to fight at any moment. From the nervous looks and the lack of will to fight in Zhong's face, Xina can tell that this place was a whole different dimension and it's a place Zhong has discovered before...

"Hell," he said, with a dramatic and heroic voice, "We are in hell..."

Burning flames surrounding an object, they suspected it was human. They edged closer, regardless of the heat in the temple. Slowly, as they walk closer, they can see that it was a human tied up in the fiery ropes of hell. It looked like was still alive but in very bad condition. The man has a muscular body and did not have any hair. He looked so strong that his body appeared like a rock. Xina immediately thought, "Yes. It's him! The legend himself, The Wok."

Just when he thought he had completed his goal, finding and rescuing The Wok, the ground started to rumble like an earthquake. The earth shook violently ten times. They looked out the window of the temple and saw rocks falling down. Mountains were collapsing like they were sand. Even the temple was about to fall apart. Zhong and Xina ran out of the temple as fast as they could. They quickly ran to the exit of the temple while the rocks fell down rapidly.

Fortunately, they went to the entrance without getting injured. The tall thick doors made of stones groaned as they slowly opened. What they saw right outside of the door had them terrified on the ground. They didn't know what to do or what to think. With unclear thoughts and their heart bursting out of their body, the sweat ran off them like streams from the mountain.

"The Dweller..."

A horrible dragon-like monster with red deadly and lifeless eyes stared right at them. With a sniff that could blow you miles away, black skin like armor wrapped around his whole body, yellowish slime sliding from its fire breathing mouth, and smoke coming from between its razor sharp teeth as big as a man's body, the Dweller was a horrific sight.

Zhong and Xina try to overcome the fear and stand up to face The Dweller, even though they know that they had no chance against this enormous beast. The Dweller roared like it was pulling its lungs out. The echo of the temple caused the loud and horrifying noise to continue, and slightly faded away.

Xina looks back to see if The Wok is still there. He was, but Zhong had already run away. "I guess I'm going to have to deal with this by myself," panted Xina. He yelled and rushed towards The Dweller, carrying his weapon. Using all the power he had left. He swished his flail in rage. right on to the dwellers eyes. Purple gooey liquid dripped from the Dweller's right eyeball and onto the ground. The grass sizzled as it evaporated from the acid in the blood. But, sadly, The Dweller had no reaction to that critical hit. "I'm done for," wailed Xina. His weapon had shattered into dust after striking the Dweller's eye. "Yes, you are." roared The Dweller with a deep voice that made the ground rumble. It was so terrifying hearing the monster speaking that Xina fainted. He knew he was going die, and he had to accept his fate.

He dropped onto the ground, unconsciously, like his soul had left his body. He was lying on the ground with a lifeless look on his face and his eyes still opened.

The Dweller stared at the body in silence. Even though the body had stopped breathing, and its heart had stopped beating, he could still sense the soul of Xina within its body. The cave fell silent. Feeling the wind, dust, and sand lightly sliding across their bodies, a huge boom split the silence and the mountains fell apart. God has noticed Xina's selflessness...

All of a sudden, the Dweller could hear and Xina's hands sizzling: like they were aflame. He immediately expanded his wings out and even enlarged his whole body which was already enormous, so he could strengthen his defense and power. He could feel it, was dangerous. Xina was getting stronger and stronger, the sparking sounds slowly got louder and louder, until was as loud as fireworks lighting up the evening sky.

A huge flash of lightening struck Xina. His eyes started to glow with the brightness of the sun, and there was blue electricity all around his body. He chuckled and said to himself, "I can feel the power and the electricity flowing through my veins. This time, I will defeat him with all that I have." He stood up with his body shaking, "I'm not used to having so much power... I need to warm up before I start this fight." And with one flick of his finger, he sent out a huge wave of electricity towards The Dweller. The walls of the cave shattered like glass, but The Dweller remained standing. Xina smirked, "Well, this is going be interesting."

New Tales of the Mogao Grottoes

Creative Secondary School, Law, Sam – 15

Yuezun was a monk no different from others. Practicing asceticism for 12 years since he was 7, the long days spent in the monastery is enough, and he finally decided to travel around the world and commit himself as a monk to spread the teachings of the Buddha, and to reach a state of nirvana through his journey. And he started the longest journey of his life.

He traveled along with some traders on the silk road, along with his dusty old yellow bag. He stood out among the troupe, as every day he did his prayers and had a lot to ask and say - sometimes the men just told him to be quiet. But Yuezun also liked his companions a lot and he was very helpful to help them out to take care of their meals. The years spent in the kitchen seemed to pay off, although they were just plain dishes to cook, very chewy bread and meat. Soon through the plain path of grass and soil, the land grew drier and drier, along rough rocky paths there wasn't much of anything alive. At one point, the environment here was uneasy, the desert was simply full of dunes and dunes of sand and hardly seeing where the path leads to, and kept on traveling listening to the sweeping sound of sand that he stepped on.

Although Yuezun had gone through different training and practices, this didn't help him much on the journey. These practices only made him more tired and even more confused and frustrated. In the desert, his body felt unfamiliar as if it didn't belong to him. He continued fasting and praying, and meditation every day. Every night, struggling to calm his breath and body as he meditated, hoping to be out of the desert soon. As days passed, he gradually seemed weaker and weaker by time. The walking and journey was so tiring that he couldn't bear to concentrate on his daily practices. Since he entered the desert, the harsh heat from the radiation of the sun, and the hot sand tortured him day by day- but he did not forget about what he was taught the past 12 years, he understood to achieve a higher state of mind, challenges had to be overcome.

So then he soon adapted to the desert along with the troupe, with his head clear that his goal was to endure the desert while maintaining a peaceful mind, that he would need a lot of concentration and effort to keep him going on the journey. Even though the trip was harsh, the people still somewhat enjoyed the night time as they had dinner next to a camp fire while singing and playing music. While enjoying the night along with the traders, Yuezun thought he had quite a new experience as he looked into the night sky, with glittery shining stars. Looking back to the start of the journey, how he practiced mindfulness, from suffering to slight enjoyment, looking forward to seeing more about life and understanding more about the way of Buddhism. And again, he seemed to have regained his confidence

Everything then seemed to be fine, but a deafening noise woke the troupe, and Yuezun found a gust of sand in the air, and a yellow cloud blocking everything in sight hurtling towards them. Every man started panicking and packing their belongings onto their camels. Yuezun was still confused with his eyes closed, lying on the ground, until the others start shouting "sand storm! Run!" Yuezun finally got up as he understood his situation, and started to find cover like the others did.

They ran for cover, while trying to carry as many of their belongings as they could, hugging in their arms and dragging on the sand. Yuezun hid behind a small boulder, barely able to cover all of himself, exposing parts of his body with sand violently hitting his skin. Yuezun held tight to the prayer beads hoping the storm would pass soon, and for everyone's safety. It seems that there wasn't anything he could do about the situation; the storm was so loud that he couldn't hear the others or see anything, so he tried his best to shout for attention, but no one answered. And Yuezun understood all he could do was to patiently endure the storm until it passed.

The storm dissipated hours later, as the sky was finally looking at the sun somewhere in the east, around nine o'clock. For Yuezun, it seemed like it had lasted for days. The storm had actually done so much harm to him, the fear of death froze his body, and he could barely move an inch. Soon as he recovered from the shock, standing up shakily and removing the sand on his body. He began gazing across the horizon of endless land of sand and searching around. He couldn't spot any sight of the traders or the camels, only leaving some left over goods half covered in sand. With no choice, he would find his way out of the desert before his food ran out.

Yuezun began scavenging anything useful to carry. He took all the consumables and a box of goods from the traders. With what he had found he trusted his instincts to follow the path he believed would lead him out of the desert. As he traveled for so long, he decided to sit and rest for a while to replenish his stamina, but he didn't realize that time passed so quickly – it was already dusk. Yuezun suddenly found a shimmering golden light on a cliff far ahead of him. He thought it would be a sign of hope. He ran to it, and arriving under it, he found an even stronger feeling of holiness. So then he further investigated the source and climbed the cliff, as if a supernatural force pulled him upwards. As he reached up, he thought there would be something behind those walls, so he tried to break the walls with a stone. From the cracks he made, he felt light going through him. He received a vision, a remarkable sight of lights and gods went into his eyes. So he tried to break more parts of the rock, and with the paints he found from the scavenged items, he decided to put the visions painted on the walls he carved. Yuezun found a new meaning in life to be devoted to these walls and to recreate all visions he saw.

He didn't notice that there was a little creature spying on him all the time. It was a creature with a beak, a pair of wings. A small brown bird was gazing from above. It is I, your storyteller. Since Yuezun arrived at the cliff, I gazed upon him as I thought he would harm me so I kept quiet. As soon as the sun rose, I decided to scare him away and I warned him with my call to alert him off my territory. He took a look at me up on the ceiling of the cave, surprised, and in a few moments he wandered off. He then soon came back with something smelling nice, wrapped in a black sheet. I was so hungry after not eating for a long time, until I realized I was pecking the soft thing wrapped in the sheet that tasted so nice. I guess that's when I decided to let him stay.

He stayed here, painting and painting all day long, then when space ran out he would carve more space and keep filling it with colour. During the day he stayed on the cliff, at night he rested right below the cliff. Although the work he was doing was repetitive, exhausting and boring, he still seemed to be enjoying it. After a week he looked so tired, all wrinkled and old, but he still kept working and breathing heavily. A few days later he began to stop, sitting on the floor lying in the shade from the cliff. He seemed just dead, lying breathlessly. I couldn't see any way to help, so I just rested beside him, to stay with him until the last minute.

However, I would still need to eat. The next day I decided to search for food, so I soared into the air. It had been so long since I had flown, I felt a sense of freedom in my wings, but weight in my legs. Searching around, I spotted a group of people. I quickly turned aside, but after a second thought I thought they might be able to save Yuezun. I took my chance I flew near them, and called out the loudest as I could, but they didn't seem to notice, so I went nearer and yelled and still they ignored me. Finally I took all the guts I ever had and swooshed, swiped between the men and finally caught their attention. I tried this again, but it seemed they were only slightly triggered, so for the final touch, I left a small gift on one of their heads - *splat*. The lucky one who got my gift just yelled and hurled sand towards me, so I flew directly to Yuezun. I kept mocking him to keep him following me. The great thing was that I was well fed the past week, so I still had a bit of stamina left to keep me going. Just at the point where the man decided to give up, kneeling down, panting and sweating hard, I thought this would be the end of it. I did not realize I was already at the cliff, and the man suddenly just ran towards it and hugged Yuezun. With tears in his eyes, he picked him up, and he said to him "good job staying alive!" Before Yuezun was carried away, he opened his eyes and winked at me, and I slowly saw them go, disappearing into the desert sands.

The Defense of Dunhuang

Creative Secondary School, Lin, William – 16

In a heavy fog that people couldn't see anything, an arrow strikes out of nowhere and directly take down Zhou's bodyguard. Zhou was the leader of Dunhuang, he always wanted to surrender to Tibet. He was terrified, he don't know whether the assassin was aiming at him or his bodyguards only. Suddenly a strong fist hit his head and knocked him out. When he woke up, he was tied with ropes in front of the people of Dunhuang. People were yelling at him, throwing things, and swearing. In the angry crowd, he was hanged. General Yan became the new leader of Dunhuang. In the year 776, Dunhuang was surrounded by the Tibetan army because of the Rebellion inside Tang had hugely weakened the border defensive power. It was the last town in Western China which has not surrendered to Tibet.

Tibet, as a vassal state of Tang for hundreds of years, decided to catch the chance and expand their territory. Trisong Detsen, the Tibetan King, led an army of 200,000 men and headed towards central China. They were crushing every army they met on their way to Chang'An, the capital of Tang. The weak armies left in the border provinces did not even have a chance to defend against the attack of Tibetans. Within 5 years, the Tibetan army had controlled entire Western China and their army was directly below the city of Chang'An.

Dunhuang's connection with the central government had lost already, there was no backup forces for them, they were all depending on themselves.

Inside the town of Dunhuang, people were motivated to defend their hometown, because the town was not only their home, it was also the recognizer of the friendship between the Tang Dynasty and other countries on the Silk Road. The Mogao Caves were built by monks from different countries, it represented the belief of people across the country and their race.

For 10 years, General Yan and the people of Dunhuang protected the town from Tibetans. The resources inside the town could not support any more longer. In the year 780, Tibetans mobilized their greatest army and planned to take over the town. Thousands of Tibetan cavalries gathered in front of the town's gate, prepared to attack at any time. Soldiers in Dunhuang were tired and hungry, they haven't been eating for two days because of the lack of food, but their spirit of defending their home was still invincible. On a starless night, the great Tibetan army started to attack. It was a huge war. The Tibetan cavalries rushed through the plain in front of the city like tornadoes. People could hear the battle cry from thousand miles away. The only thing in front of them and the city was the city's gate, but that gate was like an invincible shield that the Tibetan army can not even get close to. Tibetans tried every way that they can think of but they still can not get through that gate into the city. The battle kept on for day and night. The soldiers of Dunhuang defeated the Tibetan's attack once and once. The General and his soldiers even started to counter back on the Tibetan army. In the end, Tibetans failed to occupy the city once again. However, General Yan knew this can not last forever, his soldiers and people were starving, he can not let more of them die in this war. He started to think whether is it worth it to sacrifice thousands of lives to defend this town where he knew will be occupied one day.

His sense of responsibility finally won over his nationalistic feelings. The people who remained in the city were more important than national glory at the time. He started the negotiation with Tibet to keep his people away from the war. At the same time, the Tibetan Army was greatly defeated by Tang Dynasty's army in central China. The negotiation went on very well because Tibet has already lost most of its militaries and they could not sustain the long-term war either. Finally, they agreed on the statements which allowed the people of Dunhuang can keeping living in their hometown and Tibetans were responsible for protecting and improving the ancient Mogao Caves.

After Tibetans controlled the city, the General remained in his position and ruled the city. However, Tibetans were always afraid of him. To prevent the possible rebellion, Tibetans murdered General Yan. The great general ended his legacy but his struggle to protect his hometown will be remembered by the people forever.

Stories of the Past

Creative Secondary School, Soo, Ryan – 15

“Grandpa! Please tell me your adventure story again! I have forgotten the story already! How did you and your brothers get stuck in that cave and how did you find a way out?” Coco asked with a pair of big round eyes looking at old Shang-Lou. “Okay, I’ll tell you one last time. However, you need to go to sleep immediately after I finish my story. Deal?” Shang-Lou responded, with a weak and soft voice. Although Shang-Lou was a 120 years old man with a powder-white hair, small eyes, and a big nose, he was still healthy. “Deal!” Said Coco. So, old Shang-Lou began telling his story...

80 years ago, Shang-Lou was still young and shy. He was always afraid of doing anything because he thought that if he did something wrong, something bad would certainly happen. With two other brothers, he was the smallest: his brothers names were Xiao-Lou and Zhong-Lou. Xiao-Lou was the middle brother, and he was very active and brave; he always thought that people should try everything once, and he loved to have adventures. However, sometimes he was too aggressive in doing something, and he couldn’t stop doing it until it was finished. This sometimes made him careless. Zhong-Lou was the biggest brother, he was very clever, and he always did things very carefully, so he never made one mistake. However, he did not really like adventures. He loved reading books and solving mysteries. The three siblings always did different things together, and they lived a perfectly normal life with their family.

“Wait a second! If you said you guys are living a happy normal life, then why are you guys suddenly go to that mysterious cave? Did someone force you guys to go?” Coco asked irritably. “I am telling you now; you will know soon enough, Coco.” Said old Shang-Lou “I remember it happened in July, 1942...”

July 1942, it was a long hot summer, and the family went on a trip to Gansu province; there were some famous caves that that Shang-Lou’s dad wanted to see. Upon entering the caves, Shang-Lou suddenly heard a mysterious voice, whispering to him, “Come join us...Please...We need you to help us...”. He didn’t know where this gentle and mysterious voice came from, so he just ignored it. Maybe his brothers were playing tricks on him. His dad began to speak, “So, these are the Mogao Grottoes, caves that were made by nature a long time ago. It’s a really popular place to visit. I also heard that inside Mogao Grottoes, there are 500 caves to explore. In each cave, there are some statues and wall paintings that are all about the history of China.” Mom chuckled, “It’s adventure time!” Xiao-Lou and Zhong-Lou argued about how best to explore the caves. Just before they stopped arguing, Shang-Lou heard that mysterious voice whispering into his ear again, “I know you are coming...Stop escaping my words...” Shang-Lou was getting scared, so he again ignored these words and followed his family’s into the Mogao Grottoes.

“There was are a voice talking to you? No - that’s just your thoughts grandpa Lou; it’s all fake.” said Coco, interrupting the story again. “Just listen to the story, Coco, or else I won’t continue.” said Shang-Lou. Coco immediately stopped asking questions, quietly listening to the rest of the story.

“Come...Come inside...” This time, Xiao-Lou and Zhong-Lou heard it too; they quickly ask Shang-Lou if he also heard that mysterious voice. So, Shang-Lou told them that he had been hearing the voice since they arrived, but he didn’t know who was talking, so he didn’t tell them. “I think that sound is coming from the cave.” “I think so, too,” agreed Xiao-Lou and Zhong-Lou. “Let’s go inside the cave,” said Xiao-Lou. “No! If we are caught inside this cave alone, we are dead!” “I actually agreed with Zhong-Lou,” said Shang-Lou. “Don’t be a scaredy cat - come on... let’s go!” said Xiao-Lou, while pushing Shang-Lou and Zhong-Lou forwards.

While they were walking inside the cave, the lights from the outside world started to become darker and darker, until there was no light at all... “Open your flashlight or whatever, it’s really dark in here, and I’m getting a bad feeling about this!” “Stop yelling Shang, I’m finding my flashlight now... Ah, there, much better.” said Xiao-Lou, turning on his flashlight. Suddenly, it turned really foggy inside the cave. Although they used a flashlight, they still couldn’t see anything. The further they went, the more tired they became. After walking for what seemed like hours, they fell down on the ground, and passed out.

“Where am I?” Shang-Lou confusedly woke up and he found himself inside a really big cave. “My brothers! Xiao! Zhong! Where are you?” yelled Shang-Lou. He decided to walk out of the cave and search for his brothers. Suddenly, the mysterious voice from before whispered into Shang-Lou’s ears, said, “You want to find your brothers? The grottoes have 500 caves, and your two kind brothers are locked in one of them ... If you can find them in 3 hours, I will let you out. However, if you can’t find them, I will lock them inside one of my wall paintings, and you will need to find a way to escape here...” The cave remained silent, Shang-Lou finally decided to save his brothers and get out of this mysterious cave. So he picked up the flashlight that Xiao had dropped, and he started the journey to save his brothers.

Two hours passed, but he still didn't have a clue which path to choose as there are too many paths, and he didn't know which path linked to which cave. Finally, he had an idea, he marked each cave and path he passed, so he can know which path he hasn't been to and which he had. At this point, he had 5 minutes left, and he followed his paths that were not yet marked, and he finally found the way to his brothers. "Shang! Shang! We're over here!" His brothers yelled, and Shang-Lou finally saw his brothers. When he was running to them, that mysterious voice suddenly boomed out and shouted, "TIMES UP! Say goodbye to your brothers..." The next second, Shang-Lou saw his brother disappearing and turned into characters in the wall painting behind them. "No! No..." screamed Shang-Lou. Suddenly, that fog that was there from the beginning came again, and the a second later, Shang-Lou found himself inside the same cave as before. He sat on the ground and looked at the walls, thinking, crying. His face was all red, covered with mud and tears. After hours of crying, Shang decided he needed to find a way out of the grottoes and tell his parents about the whole story. So, he went back to the place where his brothers vanished and he took their bags because inside the bag had snacks and water, so he could stay full and hydrated.

After a few hours, he found out that there were lights at the end of the path, so he ran to the lights and found out he was finally outside of Mogao Grottoes, "I... I... did it... But my brothers are..." Suddenly, he saw an official looking man coming towards him, and that man yelled, "Hey! You shouldn't be in there, kid! Where are your parents?" The man took Shang-Lou to his parents, and he found out that his brothers were there with his mom and dad. "Where did you go Shang? We are looking for you everywhere!" "I... I was inside the cave... And... And Xiao and Zhong died, I saw them..." "You are talking nonsense right now Shang! We are leaving now; we are really tired." Xiao and Zhong agreed, and then together they left the place and went back to the hotel. In the hotel, Shang-Lou told his family about his story, but no one believed him because his brothers were with his mom and dad the whole time, so Shang-Lou decided not to mention it again, and pretended it was a lie he had made up.

"That is the end of the story. Coco, I think I can live a long life because of the mysterious power of the fog that makes me pass away in the cave. I think the inside of the Mogao Grottoes has the power to call someone to it; I guess the caves have led me to have a good life." While old Shang-Lou was talking, he saw Coco was already fast asleep. "Goodnight, Coco," said old Shang-Lou in his soft voice.

The mystery of Mogao Grottoes continues to this day.

The Buddhas

Creative Secondary School, Yau, Jasmine – 15

Near the Mogao grottoes, there is a village that is home to farmers, families, hunters, old people, and a few retired soldiers. Near the village, there are fields, rivers, and deserts. Mysteriously, the fields are not able to grow crops, and the river is an arroyo; there is nothing within the desert. Villagers are complaining about this environment because they are lacking food. After another week with little food, the chief of the village, Mr. Burno, exits his village house, and he asks the villagers if they believed in the myth of the Six Buddhas.

Mr Burno explains that a long time ago, six Buddhas were sealed in the grottoes, and they cursed the area and left the villagers lacking food for a thousand years or until someone broke the seal...

After listening to the chief of the village, the villagers discuss and decide to try and find out if there is any truth to the myth within the cave. One villager suggests bringing an adventurer to ensure their safety and to help them to plan the route. One retired army soldier told them about the legendary adventurer Mr. Andric Mason. The soldier suggests inviting him to help the village to research the myth. One day later, the villagers all agree to invite Andric Mason to help them.

One week later, *Vroom.. Vroom....* A khaki and camouflage jeep rushes across the desert and towards the village. A man wearing beige clothing carrying a backpack walks with confidence into the entrance of the village. He looks at the sky and says, 'Que lindo dia' which translates to 'Such a beautiful day it is'. The chief of the village quickly runs out and introduces Andric Mason to the villagers. He shouts, 'Let's welcome Mr. Andric Mason, the adventuring legend! Mr. Andric, welcome to our village, and thank you for helping us. We all appreciate your time and expertise! Let's all clap for Mr. Andric! Mr. Andric, please introduce yourself to us!'

'Hi, I am Andric Mason. You can call me Andric! This is my partner, the 'strong women' known as Cherish Kiristan. During this trip, we will explore the Mogao caves and find the secrets behind this cave. There are rules that I must remember. First, people under 20 and over 60 cannot join this trip. This is because the cave is too dangerous, and I want to keep everyone safe. Second, everyone has to stay together. Even though we might split up into two teams to explore, we still want people to stay in groups and be safe. The last rule is do not touch or even get anything from the Mogao Cave. The reason is because the things inside the cave do not belong to you. We do not know the secrets of the caves, so please don't touch and take anything in the cave.'

A day after, 12 people left the village; Andric and Cherish had built up a team and started to explore...

The team walks into the cave. The cave is hot and sweaty, muddy, dusty, and dark inside. There is a path leading to somewhere. Andric suggests following the path because the path may lead somewhere. After 30 minutes walking and collecting information of the cave, the path starts to vanish into a rough dusty road. The air is filled with water and it is hard for people to breathe like normal. Cherish told the villagers to drink some water to steady their breathing and to help them to breathe smoothly.

An hour later, one villager finds some murals on the rock. Andric stares at the murals and tries to figure out what they mean and what kind of message it is giving. '*There are six Buddhas that represent six warning signs. These signs are Destruction, Darkness, Pain, Curse, Death, and the Seal*' says Andric. The air filled with heaviness and fear as villagers started murmuring after listening to what Andric said.

Cherish tries to bring a positive mood to the villagers. 'There is no answer before we find out what the real myth behind this cave is. Our target is to find out the secrets of the cave; your family and others are waiting for us to come back with answers and messages. So, let's cheer up and keep going.'

Suddenly, they walk into an open area which has six stone Buddhas wrapped in tight chains. It looks like the Buddhas got locked in this area. Each Buddha looks around 2.5 meters tall, and they are massive compared to normal human beings. 'There is no way that someone can move the Buddhas into this cave. The roads are small and you even need to climb in some places. There is no way they came from outside,' says Andric. Around the Buddhas, there snakes slithering. Spider webs spread in different directions in each corner of the room. The spider webs look unlike normal spider webs; they look sharp and bloodstained. There are six words written on the floor with a dark, unknown substance. The villagers cannot identify what language it is. On the floor, it reads 'distruge, înuneric, durere, blestem, moarte, and sigiliu', which we now know means *Destroy, Darkness, Pain, Curse, Death, and Seal*. One villager sees a diamond next to the Buddhas and runs straight towards it. The second he touches the diamond, the Buddha shakes like it is going to explode. Some patterns on the rock start turning red. A voice booms

out and says, 'Human, you've fool me. Why would you do that? We are the six Buddhas that help your health, your family, and your weather. You've betrayed us and trapped us in this cave. We are putting a curse on you until someone releases us from freedom.'

A snake uses its fangs to bite that villager, and the villager didn't even have chance to say his last words. Other snakes turn and look at the villagers, Andric, and Cherish. At the same time, the floor starts shaking and it feels like it is going to fall apart. 'RUN!', shouts Andric loudly. The villagers start to run. The floor is falling apart while they are running. On the way back, there is an arrow that shot the army from the village and the old army said 'you guys will have to go without me, it is fine. Please take care of my family...' then he dies after his last sentence.

The scene is very chaotic and dangerous: rocks and roads are falling apart and snakes are chasing them. They almost arrive at the exit of the cave when, suddenly, Cherish accidentally steps on a mud trap and gets stuck in it. Andric tries to pull her out. 'Thank you so much, Andric. Thank you for loving me... I guess this is the last trip for me... Andric, do you know the meaning of my name Cherish? It means always to be grateful.' After this, she passes her wedding ring to Andric. Andric cries and runs outside the cave to meet the villagers. A huge massive rock falls down and blocks the entrance of the cave.

After this, they return back to the village and tell all of the sad news and the history behind the cave. The crops continue to fail and the villagers continue to starve.

New Tales of the Mogao Grottoes

Creative Secondary School, Yeung, Soifā – 15

Right before all the war happened, someplace, somewhere. A young monk was sitting on a big heavy rock upon the hill meditating. The breezy wind calmed his nerves, the birds twittering, the further isolation to his inner world. He was all alone until a tap on his shoulder suddenly shivered his spine. He turned to look, a face of a youngster clothed as a monk was standing beside him.

“It's quite rare to see another monk meditating here, it seems like you and I are both lonely turtles.” The youngster joked, Fa was unaware that this was the start of a relationship that would change his life forever.

“Your name?” The youngster asks.

“Fa, yours?” Fa replied.

“Atid, greetings to “Fa” there.” Another joke, Atid must be the one who jokes a lot.

“Is this some kind of secret spot? This view of the forest looks so impressive,” said Atid. The the two monks slowly became friends that would sit on the lonely big rock and meditate every day. Fa became fonder of Atid's jokes, he would even add up his own jokes in counter to Atids, the feeling of loneliness slowly fade away. Time after time, day after day, they became best friends that would always hang out in the lonely woods near Mogao. They would even go on a trip to small mountains not far away from their secret spot. It was just like fate to Fa, a weird fate that was attached to him when he was asking for help. Strange but relieving, as if God gave him another chance to live like a human.

“Say, we'll be friends forever right?” Atid asked.

Without thinking, Fa quickly responded, “Of course, forever.”

But then a tremendous war broke between the place of Mogao. The two youngsters heard musket shots and shouting from downhill, they were uncertain of what the ruckus was, but it definitely alerted both of them.

An ominous premonition.

They heard, footsteps crunching over sticks that were scattered around the forest. The sound was slowly approaching, it was like the wind passing through the forest, dashing into every corner. That's when they were alerted, an unsettling feeling crept over both of their spines.

Fa held on to Atid's hand, they dashed through the woods, up to the hills, down to the desert. From the desert, it was a long way to the nearest safe point, the sand collapsed under every step they took. They rushed and struggled all the way to the top hill, a musket bullet shot went right by Fa's right shoulder. A drip of water went right through his body and shivered the sweat out of him. He turned to look, the enemy was standing upon the desert sand raising his musket with the muzzle aiming right at him.

It was unclear of which point the enemy was aiming at, but Fa was certain that this bullet would shoot any part of his body. Even if he reacted fast, there would still be a scar caught up to his skin. The loud shot rang from the musket, it didn't take long for Fa to notice that his right leg was shot. Blood dripped in an instant, he fell to the ground, the burning pain that came from the bullet made his whole body shiver, his right leg was in a cramping state. He only clutched his teeth to hold the pain, trying his best to use his left leg to keep on the run.

Atid's hand was always holding on to Fa. As their pace slowed down, he quickly turned to Fa and noticed the bullet wound on his right leg. At the first sight that he saw Fa's condition, he knew it was a dead-end for the both of them, enemies were getting closer. Atid took a small peek over to the enemies, they had their muskets raised, but didn't plan on triggering it, it seemed that they would take both of them hostage.

Atid took a quick think, he then turned to the enemies raising both of his hands in the air, slowly blocking Fa's sight. Enemies surrounded them quickly, putting both of them in a surrendering state.

"Wait, I have something to say," Atid spoke.

The enemies looked at Atid in a confusing state, ready to hear whatever he had to say.

Atid has a friendly smile on his face, but it didn't express the feeling that he was having at the moment.

"Take me instead, and I will kill my friend."

The sentence had made the enemies a weird look on their face, they didn't even think of killing both of them just yet, taking hostage would make more of a benefit to them. But they simply laughed about it, like it was just some joke.

Fa was already in a bad state, hearing that his only friend suggest killing him made him tremble even more. He gazed over to Atid's face, that desperate face to live, the fact that he will ever see afterward.

He thought, 'Atid will never kill me right? He's my best friend, right? He wouldn't do this!' Questioning himself made his fear of death grow stronger, he was unsure of whether he was afraid of death or his best friend killing him in his hands.

That's when the enemy gave Atid one of their muskets. To prevent Atid from using the musket against them, they hold the musket towards Fa, having the muzzle against his forehead. The cold metal feel of the muzzle was a contrasting feeling compared to the heat and pain whelming over his body. Fa's eyes teared up a bit, it was full of despair, but it still remained the eager, the trust that was given to Atid.

It was such a bewildering sight in the enemy's eyes.

But it was an terrifying sight in Fa's eyes.

Don't pull the trigger - you wouldn't right? You said it before, we'll be friends forever, you wouldn't break that promise, right?

Their eyes met together, one begging in fear, desperation. But the other just gave a cold, dull expression, no emotion could be seen on his face. His chest hurt, but not physically, it's mentally. He could even hear his own heart pounding, the fast beat just made him suffer even more.

What were you thinking at that moment? Fa thought.

Everything seemed to freeze in time, the silence around the desert. Only to hear the giggling behind Atid's back.

"I'm sorry Fa, but, I guess we should end it here."

"No, Ati--"

Why did you betray me?

Atid's finger pulled the trigger He stayed silent, rather calm. But his shivering legs gave him away.

I'm sorry Fa, but wouldn't it be better if you die in my hands rather than living as a hostage in their torture?

It was quiet. It was lonely.

Fa opened his eyes again, only absolute darkness.

Did he die?

Fa's head was dizzy and hurting, it must be what happened just then. That frightful memory that would never erase from his mind. He yelled in anger, but his dry throat and husky voice just hurt his throat even more. He would rather just sleep in eternity and never be reminded of that bad memory.

But then, a source of light broke his thinking process. He took a closer look, it was just a torch hanging on the wall. He looked at it in confusion. Suddenly, an unclear vision appeared in front of him, it was more like puffs of smoke slowly gathering together. There, he saw the appearance of an unknown statue, its hands were meditating just like how a monk does. A very fancy but pale appearance, like no one, has ever touched it in many, many years.

"What are you?" Fa questioned.

The statue moved a little, the torch shining behind it just made it look like it was some kind of god.

"You dare to question me?" The statue replied in a very odd tone and sound as if someone in the deep sea would sound like.

The statue kept on, "I saved you, you mortal. You were dry dead upon the sand, I see you as pitiful and revived you in this place of, grottoes. Which is my home."

Fa looked around the space that he was in. Surely it wasn't a big cave but there were entrances and holes to other caves that weren't discovered yet.

"Why, why did you save me? You should have kept me dead over there!" He exclaimed in a grievance, his only friend, an only best friend betrayed him in order to survive. His eyes were feeling numb, tears were filling up his eyelids. He cried loudly, like suffocating, letting all his emotions, painfulness vent out. Did God give him redemption? So he can now take revenge on his best friend? He doubted it, but it was certainly a miracle that he was still alive, must be the unknown statue's magic. He didn't question it because he was too tired to be curious, the agony tortured him for hours or even days.

Out of no where, he noticed that there were buckets of paints and a big brush on the ground nearby. Feeling slightly confused, he picked up the brush and dipped in one of the red coloured paint. He paused for a moment and turned his gaze to the statue, it was still like stone, it was definitely the statue's doing, but he didn't bother to care and started painting on the wall he was facing. Fa wasn't sure what he was supposed to paint. He loved to paint in the past days, but now the emotions that were deep inside his heart were bothering him so much.

Maybe the way of letting his emotions out was to paint.

Then, a gorgeous artwork appeared, it was stunning and colourful, different colours gathered up to make a fascinating piece of work. But Fa wasn't satisfied, he knew the moment when he had a long shot of his painting. It was a painting of Atid, he didn't know why he painted the one and only person that he hated and loved. It was an indescribable feeling, but he knew it wasn't enough for him.

So he kept on the days of painting, day by day, until the statue gave him another equipment, a blank paged book. Fa had never seen this object before, seeing a pencil on the ground made him wonder, was it similar to carving things on the wall too? He tried the pencil on the wall, it was clearly invisible, so he tried it on the first page of the book. When a tiny bit of line was written, Fa thought it was interesting and started his journey in this book.

As time passed, Fa grew older, even though time flew away, his memories stayed solid like stone. He still remembered Atid, he wondered how had Atid been. Was he dead? Or was he still alive? The past few years, Fa was meditating to the statue, painting walls, discovering new caves to paint on, finishing his book of his journey. He saw these objects as a memorial between him and Atid, by looking back at all their stories together, tears uncontrollably were let out.

He missed him, he missed the humorous friend that he loved so much.

But he might never see him again.

At last, he faded away in the dark grottoes, cold and cozy. In the end, the statue was the last thing he saw, seeing the pale old man lying on the ground, and scanning through every wall it saw.

It carried Fa's body away, not leaving any pieces of bones to be seen. Sending the soul of Fa's straight away to heaven.

Centuries passed, light was leaking from a fragile wall, as the wall broke down, the shining light poured in and lit up the whole cave. The explorers were surprised by the sight they saw, paintings, sculptures were everywhere in the grottoes. They all took a deep breath, heart filled with excitement. After a small tour, they discovered an old book on a counter that was covered in dust. They slowly opened the book, and read.

"There once was a lonely boy, who found light in his life..."

"Slowly fading into the darkness..."

Saving the Adventurer from Demon Lord

Creative Secondary School, Yu, Amelia – 15

“Wait! Please don’t leave me!”

The end.

That’s the ending of the book that Ren was reading, it was one of the books that he got from his friend working at the bookstore. It was marketed as an adventure and fantasy book, but Ren doubted that, as a matter of fact, it was one of the most boring books that he had ever read. He was quite pissed at the fact that he wasted 5 hours reading this book. He threw the book on the ground, and quickly walked towards his bed and fell asleep.

“Wake up! Wake up! We have to leave!” As Ren was sleeping he heard a voice telling him to wake up and leave, he flipped over and continued to sleep. Ren thought that he was still sleeping, but then two large hands grabbed him and started shaking him. He started to realize that he was being grabbed by two hands, the feeling was too real to be a dream! He quickly opened his eyes and started to look around and at that moment he knew that he was not in his room, not even in his bed, and he was being shaken by a random guy that he didn’t even know. He started to feel scared and screamed. Shocked by the noise, the stranger stopped shaking him and stepped back a few steps.

Both of them looked at each other and the stranger said “ Are you okay? I’ve been trying to wake you up for 10 minutes!” Ren looked at the unknown guy standing in front of him and stated “Who are you?” The stranger looked stunned, and he started to laugh, “ Nice joke, but we don’t have time for that, we have to leave before those people come and destroy this place.” He laughed.”

“No, I am not joking! I am 100% serious, who in the world are you and where am I!” Ren looked distressed, it doesn’t seem fake. The gears in the strangers’ head started to turn, from the huge grin that he showed to the face of distress. Ren looked scared, he thought that he did something wrong, he wanted to comfort the stranger, nonetheless, he just sat there and looked at the stranger muttering quickly under his breath. The unknown guy quickly stood up and slapped his cheek. He introduced himself “ My name is Haru and we are in a hotel but we have to leave NOW. I will explain everything to you in time, for now, please trust me and leave with me.”

Ren looked at that weirdo and thought that he can currently trust the weirdo since he is in an unknown world and has no idea what is happening, Ren decided that his best bet was to trust that guy.

They quickly got out of the hotel and ran, ”BOOM!” the hotel that they stayed in exploded. Ren was shocked, to say the least, but Haru kept running, pulling Ren along with him. Ren didn’t know what to do so he just followed the stranger that he just met a few minutes ago. They ran for quite a while, Ren just felt that he was about to die from exhaustion, they went inside a cave, the cave has tons of statues and it was still in good shape. Haru decided to spill the beans, he sighed and started talking, “ We are currently in a mogao cave, it will provide us with a shelter for now before we have to leave again.”

Ren looked at Haru like he was some sort of alien, Ren quickly composed himself and started to listen to what Haru wanted to say. After a few hours he finally finished, Ren was tired, scared and had tons of emotions that he didn’t know he could feel. Since it was now dark, the Mogau cave was starting to get creepy, the statues were starting to look like they were staring right into his soul. He quickly sat next to his new friend, Haru started telling the origin of the mogao cave, “Supposedly a monk called Yuezun has a vision of thousands of Buddhas shining on the cliff face, so there are over a thousand painted and sculptured Buddhas housed in the caves, but legend says that if you find the Buddha sculpture made of gold and you give them an offering, you will be able to wish for something you truly long for. But of course, that is just a legend, no one even knows if there is actually a golden statue made of gold.” Haru claimed.

After listening to the ‘legend’ that Haru just said, Ren started to think of a plan, he wanted to go back home, to his warm bed, and continue his life before he got into this weird storybook. He knew what was going to happen next, but he just couldn’t help but wonder, does his existence affect the whole story plot and will he be able to find the golden statue and go back home?

Tons of questions roamed around his head, he slowly felt exhausted and fell asleep next to the stranger that he just met in the morning.

The bright light shined into the cave waking Ren up, he quickly sat up and saw that he was still in this world, it isn't a dream, he was doomed..... he saw that he was in the cave where the statues were staring at him, he could feel chills running down his spine, he swiftly swooped around the area, seeing that no one was there, he started to panic since he was all alone in a world that he just came, he started yelling Haru's name. Suddenly, a head popped out of the cave, Haru announced "Yes? You called?". Ren got so embarrassed since he didn't know that Haru was just outside the cave and holding some fruit that he picked from a tree. After eating breakfast they started to get out of the cave and continue their trip. They started to move towards the north to find the golden statue that only exists in legends.

It took days for them to find the supposed cave with the golden statue that grant wishes, they quickly went inside the cave to see if the legend is true, the cave was full of booby traps there were spider webs all around the place, with the skeletons and not corpse all around the area, corpse holding weapons, gold and silver treasures all around the place.

"I guess this is the place." Ren assumed since the place was filled with a horrid stench that he can't explain. The cave was also filled with statues but this one is different from the ones they stayed in, this cave was filled with paintings, embroideries, weird-looking artefacts. When he was lost in his mind, he bumped into his partner, the golden statue was just in front of them. It felt so real and fake at the same time, both of them could believe their eyes. They were dazed in front of the golden statue..... until the ground started to rumble, the statues around the golden statue started to move at the same time, the main characters were about to scream but composed themselves and pulled out their weapons, Ren with the sword and Haru with a bow. The statues stood up, moving their arms and legs robot-like, they were slow which gave the two time to run out of the cave and give them enough space to fight the scary-looking statues.

The moving statues came out of the cave, the statues were smashing everything they can see, the rocks outside of the caves were smashed in seconds, the ground cracked, Ren and Haru tried to jump away from the attacks, but the escape was futile unless they find a way to destroy the statues they will get hurt from the attacks from the stone statues. They decided to hide behind a rock for now since they need to compose themselves and create a plan to win against the statues and save themselves. They decided to create a distraction first, using the rocks that they found next to them, they threw the rock in hopes to get the statues attention, then they will both attack, it was a last-minute plan so they weren't really confident in it, but it was better than nothing, the statues fell for the trap and they both attacked the statues synchronized, the rocks on the statues were too hard for their weapons to break through so they needed to jam their weapons in the cracks of the rocks, but when they jammed their weapons on one of the statues, it was full of wires! "What?" They couldn't comprehend the information that they just received, all of the statues were gigantic robots. Who would do such a thing, trying to kill people using statues, it was the stupidest thing that they both have heard. Ren thought about this, it wasn't stated in the book, heck this part of the adventure wasn't even in the book.

A crash snapped Ren out of his thoughts, it was Haru crashed into the cave, the statues were gone so there was no way it was the statues, he looked up and saw a saucer flying up in the air, a robotic voice spoke " Haru, come back to us willing and we will not hurt your friend. This is your last warning!" A gun was pointed at Ren's head, Ren was freaking out, he was sweating buckets. Haru got up and screamed "Don't hurt him, please! I will go with you so please don't hurt him."

Ren was shocked, he didn't know what was happening, "Huh?" That was all he could muster, he was dumbfounded at the scene that was looking at, his brain was overdriven by the information that he was given. "Good choice son."

Ren looked at Haru then looked at the flying UFO, he said " The UFO is your father?" Haru just looked at Ren and said " Sorry. I will be leaving now." Ren was shocked, to say the least, the whole adventure is ending? This can't be possible, they had so much fun and that UFO is his father? God, what kind of storyline is this. A father building robots just to make his son come back, and threatening his son that will shoot his friend if he doesn't comply?

Haru climbed up the UFO and left. Ren looked at the spaceship and thought to himself that he will be the person saving Haru from his father. Ren started to run trying to follow the spaceship, he ran and ran but of course, he could not have caught up. He was exhausted and pissed at himself for not saving his friend from his father. Ren wanted to rest but he believed that saving his friend was more important. But he was too tired and he started seeing things blurry, he couldn't breathe and he dropped down on the ground and fainted.

When he woke up, he was back in his real bed, he was back in his room in the real world, he panicked, he thought he was supposed to be in the middle of nowhere, he was supposed to save his friend that was being “kidnapped” by his father? He was panicking like crazy, is he in another world or is he in the real world. He doesn’t know if he is still in a dream or he woke up. It seems too real to be fake. He remembers Haru’s warm hands shaking him up and saving him from the explosion.

Wait..... he knew that there was going to be an explosion when I woke up, does that mean he knew that his father was looking for him?

Why am I even thinking about it?

It’s just a dream?

Right?

But it felt so real.

What is the time now?

Should I leave for school?

I am such a mess.

He quickly changed his clothes and went to the university that he was studying in, he zoned out in class and didn't even realize his classes had ended. He quickly went back to his dorm room and slammed the door, and slid onto the ground, he felt guilty. He just threw away the new friend he just made. While he is staying in the comfort of his own room, his friend is being trapped by his father. What should he do? Should he actually go back to that other world? But how can he go back to that other world? Is there even a way to go back?

He looked at his room, scanning the possible ways that he could go back to that world and save his friend. He remembered the cave that he saw during the adventure, he thought back to the cave and opened the book that got him into this mess in the first place. He quickly reread the book and found the chapter that the caves were in if he guessed correctly if he opened the book on where they last saw each other, and he goes to sleep he should end up back at the place where he fainted. Ren quickly went back to bed and made himself go to sleep.

He woke up at the place he fainted, does that mean that he is actually dreaming and all of this isn’t real, or he just teleports to the place because of the book. This is actually very confusing. Ren quickly ran, he wanted to find Haru quickly, he went over mountains, caves, and finally went back to the place where he first saw Haru or the place that used to be the hotel. There were some people around the hotel, he picked up his pace and asked one of the people that was sitting next to the pile of broken concrete. Ren asked the person and he found out that UFO belongs to the king, so that means that Haru is the prince! He ran as fast as he could to reach the castle, it was majestic, as it was expected from a king.

Ren wanted to get into the castle but there were guards patrolling the place, he scanned the place and found a hole that might let him sneak through, it was his only chance that he could get into the castle, he scaled up the wall and went in the hole, as he expected it was almost too small for him, he wiggled his way through the hole and found himself in a corridor, the corridor was decorated with paintings of the king himself, “Self-absorbed.” Ren snickered. He ran across the corridor and went into the room that was located at the end of the corridor, it was locked, he knocked on the door and there was a voice “Who is it?”. It was a high pitched voice, and it definitely wasn’t Haru’s. Haru had a silky voice that was pleasant to the ears, but it sounded like an opera-singer on helium. Ren inquired “Do you know where the prince is? I am new here, and he wanted something to drink.” The high pitched voice replied, “It’s one floor above.”

Ren thanked the high pitched voice and ran up the stairs which were conveniently located on the right side of the corridor, and conveniently, there was a door. Ren knocked on the door and there was it, the silky voice that he remembered so clearly. He composed himself and stated, “I am here... to save you Haru.” “No! You are not supposed to be here, you should have left when you had the chance, why are you even here, how did you even get past the security?”

“I mean there was a hole that allowed me to sneak through, so I came to save you,” Ren stated like he was supposed to be here.” Ren opened the door by picking the lock. The door opened, revealing Haru in flesh. Ren quickly hugged Haru, Ren was so relieved, he thought that he almost lost his friend. Ren pulled away from the hug and grabbed Haru’s hand. They swiftly ran down the stairs. Haru said, “I am so glad that I have a friend like you.” “You can continue that sappy talk later, right now, we need to leave this place.”

They ran across the corridor, found the hole that Ren crawled through, and quickly wiggled their way out, they scaled down the wall and ran as if their life depended on it. They found a weird-looking vehicle and Haru hopped on, Ren followed. The vehicle was as fast as the speed of light, wrecking everything in its path. Then screams of anger were heard.

They were laughing in pure joy, finally, Haru escaped the castle and they could get away from the king. They ended up back at the golden statue, “So what are we going to do?” Ren asked. Haru started to speak, “I know you are not from here, and we are now in front of the golden statue, so I think you should go back to your own world. I thank you from the bottom of my heart that you decided to come back here and save me.”

Ren didn’t know what to say, he was agitated, he knew that Haru will get caught by his father again if he leaves. He conjures a plan, “How about we both leave this place, you could come live in my world and I can protect you from your father if he ever comes and searches for you.” Haru cried and said, “Yeah, I think it will work.”

They made a wish in front of the golden statue and they started to glow, it was too bright and they closed their eyes, and when they opened their eyes, they were in Ren’s room. Haru was finally free from his father. He was relieved.

After all, it’s a new experience for both of them.

Flamed

Diocesan Girls' School, Fu, Cheuk Yiu Tiffany – 15

Summer, 1900

I. Ignite

Hand on the mosaic, fingers tracing the rings, shrouded by turquoise. Hear the voice of nature as it calls upon the soil and clay to blend into the concoction seamlessly.

“Home,” she exclaims.

Darkness engulfs the dingy surroundings, and the nightly air strokes her cheeks as she rummages through the remains of the cavern, and grins, relieved. Flames light up the shallow scene from the small torch that she holds. She points the torch at the upright center and sees the Buddha's statue sitting in the exact position, comfortably enrobed in a vibrant shade of red.

To look at him in the eye, to feel the tranquillity that the Buddha himself has bestowed upon those that devoutly follow his guidance, is a relishing act. Her eyes glow as she confides in his majesty. And she utters a deep sigh and murmurs, in silence, a prayer:

I have come. From the depths of the deep seas and the brilliance of the skies, I have come. To avenge, to obtain, the lost, the forgotten. To serve the erudite which lodge in our paradise. To comfort the awakened scrolls and fantasies, so they shall endure no more, the disruptions of the Earth, and rest, undisturbed by passers-by, in peace.

The flames ignite, bright as diamonds freshly extracted from a prospector's mine, and the complex is now warm, animated, the liveliness of the cave restored once more.

II. Illuminate

And she stands on the ground, barefoot, the legs seeping into the sand. The clouds soften her green robe as her hair illuminates, flaring like the flames from the torch that lights up the cracks on her cane, yet they are no match for the cruelty of the dry, barren land. And he stands, opposite, his lustrous brows raising, and the forehead crumples, boiled and darkened, like medicine that gets bitter. The long, piled-up streaks of silvery hair complement the sea-blue silk that wraps his body, and the cold drops of sweat drooping on his shaven face are the tears that have once dampened his skin and replenished his soul.

"Child, why are you here, in the middle of the night, engrossing yourself in the desert?"

Wang, I know who you are, and in my most innocent dreams, I have witnessed the sly movements of your shadow. I saw the flames flicker - and I knew that one day, you would come, and I shall have to conceal the knowledge that the treasures of this very cave have of the world.

"Shi-tan, please listen. The fruit of the world lies not in seclusion, but, rather, in sharing and endless inquiry."

To share is to burn. To conceal is to illuminate. Wang, oh, Wang, I will not be fooled - for with the twitching of my fingers I can deduce that you have been tracking me down, endlessly, day and night, and the trails of coal I have left along with me must have inspired you to intervene in my daily preservation of the grotto.

See the eerie twinkles of the stars that seem to be harmonizing with the roaring of the flames, like a lion shaking his mane, and shriek, like the mirroring of a child's ghost, all veiled by nature's despair. The fabricated confidence in her eyes divulges her apprehension, her fear.

"Shi-tan, do not perceive me as your competition. I am an old crippled priest, and my mind does not contain the agility to surpass your excellence. I only wish to preserve this historical wonder as a person of culture."

It appears that we have different interpretations of the word "preservation", Wang. Wang, you, as a Taoist, could never comprehend the righteousness of the Buddha and the riches he confers on us. As flawed followers, we learn to practice revelation but not to disclose his secrets recklessly.

"As if the legendary cavern is a secret itself?" Wang makes a satirical remark.

She ignores him, her head tilted towards the entrance.

My family has kept the map inside a small compartment for a millennium. Generation after generation, we have sworn on our lives not to succumb to the complex or revive the out-moded art. It stays hidden, Wang. It always will be.

The priest recites the words with his crooked, shriveled lips. Beat by beat, rhythm to rhythm does he listen and remember them by heart, letting out a vile smile, "To be obliged to your family's will is merriment, but to secrete the truth out of selfishness will only bring karma. So stay vigilant, Shi-tan, for I know where the entrance lies since you have just emerged from it." He chuckles.

You may have found the entrance, Wang, but you cannot exploit it.

He makes no reply. Shi-tan stands as a fully-composed Wang ambles away, limping in the process. The flames in the torch radiate, and the whole ceiling of animals and small dots gleams, in ferocity, in anger, in hatred, for she understands that Wang was not deceitful in his response, yet she has fathomed out his reasoning. And she condemns it and demeans it.

It shall not happen.

The flames illuminate and guide Shi-tan into relieving her doubts. She looks up onto the night air, and the constellations are now delicate swarms of fireflies, glowing faintly. She has discovered her desire for victory in protecting her only property, and she beams, determined and fearless.

III. Burn

It is morning. The sun coruscates through the celestial skies, and the sweat drips, drips, and drips. Shi-tan washes them away while bundling up her hair with a piece of smeared, stained cloth.

Yearning, she enters the cavern, dashing into the shallow interior, the winds puffing, puffing, and puffing. But luckily, the torch stays intact, and in turn, the fire burns rapidly, intensifying, unable to be extinguished.

Barely six hours have passed after Shi-tan's counter with Wang, the old rural priest who always makes an effort to deceive by his decorative language. Not a good lad, indeed, her father has advised. Her teeth chatter at the thought of him sneaking into the cave and claiming all of the catches. Interestingly, the Taoist has used valid reasoning to explain his actions; it makes sense, but she still chooses not to accept such a notion.

Sharing is pivotal in determining one's morality, but in the case of the Mogao caves, it simply is not viable to share. Perhaps the familial traditions she has been following may have confined her beliefs, but she cannot possibly be sure of it as she ponders.

She strides into the cave. And there lies the Taoist, carrying a bag of calico fabric, a devilish, infuriating smile sewn on his face, his fingers on the parchment, rubbing the surface with so much force. Her eyes widen in appall as she witnesses him grasping hold of a scroll, extracting its beauty, and devouring the rich unknown embedded on its skin.

Her eyes burn, the fury inflaming, fierce as an emperor rapaciously ordering the beheading of his disloyal servant. The prophecy she had devised in her dreams when she was a wee toddler is becoming true at that instant, and so are the rest of the thoughts she has had in mind.

Thief - hands off the manuscripts! Let them lay on the ground, and let them rest. It was fate that our ancestors abandoned the art, and as its guardian and a hero, I must play a part in this play and cast you away from this defunct luxury.

No - how dare you place your hand on the eye of the Buddha -

" - And you call yourself a hero. For centuries this library of mystery, the door that would uncover the secrets of your own blood, your own history, has been hidden, buried, and vanished from all of China. And yet you fail to recognize the significance of unveiling it.

"If you were the guardian of this cave, you would have gladly left it upon your discovery and kept it untouched for years, but you still come back every day.

"For what, child? What desire do you plan to fulfill?"

To avenge my family. To carry on the mission that my deceased ancestors have spent their lives fulfilling. Their bodies lie under the sand of this very cave, intricate as it seems, but I will not let you, nor anyone else, not even the English investigators, enter what rightfully belongs to me.

"Aha! A selfish soul avenges itself, and you are no exception. And one day, we shall call you Shi-tan, the Buddhist that capitulates to the roots of evil that linger in her twisted malice." He switches to a milder, more lenient tone.

"Child, I have kept my eye on you, and here I plead for you to tamper with your folly. Re-interpret your selfishness, and let the adults handle the work."

The cave feels damp as if it is raining. The turquoise of the walls turns grey, and the teardrops ricochet as Shi-tan enlarges her eyes in disbelief. She startles the statue, the figure she has been worshipping piously, and the clay on the already half-demolished wall dissolves from its ornamented coating. It crumbles.

The interior is monotonous, dull, shrouded by soot, and Shi-tan simmers and squeals, crying out from her heart, shredded into fragments. She broods over the words of the old priest, which abruptly shatters the image in front of her, the self-image that she is keen to retain. She has fallen prey to his deceit, and her mind explodes in a frenzy as she sobs and pants, running out of time to deliberate: How is an uneducated priest so all-knowing? Is he a prophet? What is he?

She yells and screeches, and the thoughts cease to circulate.

But selfishness will not stop me from taking care of what is mine. And your words do not stop me from controlling what I rightfully own. Only I should be able to access this marvel, for I am the blood of the first guardian of this very cave! Leave, now, leave!

The torch, it burns, the fire ablaze. Shi-tan snatches the bundle away and tosses the crimson spear towards the unarmed soldier, the unarmed foe. Her eyes show no sympathy as she pleases herself with the colossal burning of the fires. The flaxen bag drops from Wang's shoulder, and its exterior falls apart before the manuscripts gain a tint of coal, extinguished within the blink of an eye. He ensconces himself onto the ground, as the scrolls exist no more.

Wang stands on the floor, his worn-out robe slightly burnt, but he grins, "By avenging your hatred, you have destroyed what you have desperately yearned to defend."

She stops moving. Her eyes soften, and time freezes, shrinking into the frame of a waxed stamp. The aggravating sense of guilt permeates her heart. Overwhelmed by an inundating amount of wet tears, she falters and escapes from the massive treasures, now carcasses. She leaves the torch, still burning and luminous, and bolts out of the cavern, sniveling as she becomes aghast by the terror she has inflicted on the place she has once called "home".

Flames, they burn and bellow; even with the Taoist's water supply the well, they will never wither, as long as the ferocity is still prevailing. And as Shi-tan realizes that her battle would end in defeat, she flees into the unknown - a decision made on a whim.

She sighs, repenting.

Summer, 1908.

IV. Extinguish

"Cave 17, the Library Cave"

Hand on the statue, fingers tracing the patterns on the altar, shrouded by a fresh cover of oil. She is delighted as she finds the turquoise soil and clay enlivened, revitalized by the sunning from the scholarly investigators of ancient Asian art. All seems tranquil, including Shi-tan herself, who tries to immerse herself into the vibrancy of the complex during this secret but unexpected visit.

Covering her whole body with a black velvet piece of cloth, Shi-tan picks up the torch with the hand on her right, now extinguished, perpetually. Her mind runs through the former power and glory of the torch, which has almost burnt down and demolished the massive rediscovery of this eternal paradise.

The sun rays brighten the sacred surroundings, and the winds from the past stroke her face. She can immediately interpret the omen - the excavations have freed the caverns. She kneels in front of the altar, imploring a halt in the sufferings of the once impulsive adolescent. To fearfully stare at his presence, to feel the daunting intimidation of the twinkle of the Taoist that lies in the statue's tinted eye, makes her agitated, restless. She spots a label stuck underneath the altar:

"37. Marked by Stein. I thank Wang the Abbot for his service."

The adult, who at one point has been tempted by the delicacy of her desires, is now weeping at the sight of how things have marvelously changed in the cavern since her departure. She murmurs, in silence, after a whole eight years, another prayer,

I have returned. From the muffled parts of the bamboo grove and the ambush of my deepest desires, I have returned. To reflect and contemplate on my fury, my angst.

And I look into the chambers, the scrolls stored safely within in remorse, for I have failed to serve the erudite and comfort the awakened by lingering in my own temptations. And perhaps the act of sharing the treasure with the world and letting it take note of its power is not detrimental after all.

The flames finally extinguish after years of repentance and reflection. Shi-tan is now warmed, recognizing that the complex has been embellished and blossomed under the guidance of Wang and the western scholars, and the wonder, the Mogao Caves, are zestful once more.

Dear You (from me)

Dulwich College Beijing, Rhyu, Suah – 15

Dear You, who has left me for a short time,

How have you been? I anxiously await your arrival.

Nothing has changed here in your absence.

People pray every day. I think, perhaps, it is the way you have carved me that has made me so loved. They compliment me often because of your golden hands. This one is nice, they say. This one is beautiful. There are many here but I know I am the one that those stop in front of, believing I will bring them good luck; it is all due consequence of your skilled hands. I thank you constantly for putting so much effort into the calloused hands that shaped me, and I miss you now.

Let me tell you what has happened while you were gone. Many suns have passed, each new one being one that I cannot see with you, but it does not matter because even with the rock I am made of, I can still feel the warmth of its light. The cliff-face that had been used to create my chamber is no different, and there are new companions that I see entering frequently, with their faces freshly painted and their ornaments glistening in dim light. You would be delighted to see them because I know for one that you love change. Newness, if you will.

People come every day but some stand out more than others, several that can be pinpointed sometimes. There is the dark-haired man with his dark-skinned face and his sun-kissed arms, and as his shoes are well-worn, I know he travels here from a long distance. He prays to me every day and kisses me when he thinks no one is watching. He thinks I am an ear of God.

I want his prayers to be answered. He has a sick mother, I think, and no wife will take him because he is poor. Do you think his prayer will be answered?

If God listens through me, I think he will answer his prayers; the young man is a nice man and he believes in what you have made.

There is the small girl, too. She comes every day with her father, and while her father sits outside with smoke from his mouth, she rubs at my feet and tells me about the soup she has made. I like her, too. I know a child knows nothing much, but I also know that the small coin that she settles at my feet every day means more than a million dollars does for the rich. If God is listening through my ears, he may answer her prayers, too.

People pray every day. I wish to tell you all about them. Before you had sat by me and eagerly listened to every last one of my words, but it is different now. You are not here right now so I send this to you, hoping that you will catch the gist of what it is that I wish to say.

There are so many things I would ask you, but none of that can be put into words. How are you doing? Where are you? In the land that you have gone to briefly, do you think of me too? Do your hands, busy as ever, still create shapes and colors and miracles and follow God? I hope they do: when they do, it puts a smile on your face. It seems to make you happy.

I miss you. I hope you are doing well.

-

Dear You, who has taken a longer trip than both of us had ever expected,

How is the land you have been away in for longer than years?

I hope you have found unfathomable wonders there, where it is so different from this desert. Tea leaves, safflowers, squid ink, madder root; there is, hopefully, something better than these dull materials where you are now.

I miss you. It has been long since I have seen your kind face.

Sometimes, I remember you like a wife remembers her veteran husband, awaiting his return with no passage of time. You are cold (unlike me; who had thought of the expression 'stone-cold'?) but a drop of emotion, like the dyes that painted your hard fingers, always stir beneath your eyes. You stroke me goodbye and promise to return.

Sometimes, I remember you as a father that has left his son with reluctance. You told me tales and called me a God; you taught me skills and showed me how the world worked. You were a little crazy, perhaps, because I had never seen another man (another alchemist – was that what you had been?) talk to his creation the way you had.

Sometimes I remember you like I remember my own face. The way you described it because there had been no reflection I could gaze into: your face is painted like a war general, you had said. You are like a hooligan. Yet, you are a God. You are a wise man and you will guide those in need, with nothing but your presence. You are a piece of art for those to look upon and a beast for those to fear.

You are the same. You had guided me, and without a sign to show my way, I do not know where I am.

Fewer people come, too. I do not wish to say this, because I know it will make you worry, and I know that you are a worrisome man. But fewer people come, and your companions are constantly worried about this.

The girl has grown up and she no longer comes. The boy still has no wife, and although he comes, they are half-hearted prayers thrown at my feet and I am hesitant on whether I can pick them up or not. It seems after so long, people are beginning to find out the truth; you, the True God, have left. I am just your ear and nothing more because people grow thinner by the day. Hundreds become a hundred, and a hundred becomes fifty, and now I know no one that comes as frequently as they used to. The chamber once lit with sweet-smelling oils and filled with artists passionate to show their Gods off is now dim and diluted like someone has poured too much water into soup.

That is how the girl would have described it, anyway. I do not know how you would have; your intelligence precedes me all the more.

The people, I think, do not come because people forget, just like you have forgotten to return in your joy over being in such a bright, new place.

Someone died, too. More people are dying, and today one of your companions (the one with eyes that had seemed dull at first but is now known to be clouded with imagination) came to me with expressions more negative than most. He uttered words I could not process, and he talked about burials, and he talked about you.

Not your burial, I think (I hope) because if you are dead, you would have told me. I believe you would have.

I hear prayers, but not that many anymore. The only eyes that look at me are weary with annoyance, and those who have come once seldom return, and just like that I am buried under tilling and working and feeding their family. I understand, I truly do.

I just want you to realize what has happened because surely, you returning can solve this?

It has been so long since I have been graced by your presence. Please, return.

Many are awaiting your return – not just me.

-

Dear You, who seem less likely to return with every second that passes,

Did you know statues are afraid of the dark?

No, wrong. That is phrased incorrectly, as that is not what I am. Let me, perhaps, rephrase this: did you know your masterpieces were afraid of the dark?

I did not know, either. Today, I found out that I was.

One of the people that had been a frequent visitor of mine, back when you were still with me, had been afraid. They had come to God's ear to pray for courage to stand against the creeping darkness, the same one that surrounds me now.

I know you mean well for me, and I know you wanted me to become like a general. But I am afraid because...

How long has it been since I have been trapped in darkness?

Your companions no longer came to the cave, and this seems to follow you because you no longer do, either. I am kept in perpetual darkness and I am scared because this lack of light is something that seems to creep up on one. None of the others seem to be aware of this, but I am aware and I am equally as frightened of this as I am of—regretfully, and shamefully too, as I bow my head to you—you leaving forever.

No one comes to the cave anymore. That is why the lights are out, but even with the entrance that lies as bare as my feet that people had once placed offerings upon, I still wish for someone to come. Every day I am still and there is not a footstep nor a person.

God's ear is left in the dark. No one needs me anymore, I think, at least for now. I merely have to wait, as I do for your arrival.

The lights are out; I am afraid, and I wish to close my eyes. I have never closed my eyes before and this is regretful, but then again since you had not created me with the sense to, this must surely be a purposeful design of yours?

I do not close my eyes. I still wish you would return.

This call to you is brief as I am afraid of the dark.

-

Dear You, who seems like nothing but a fleeting memory now,

When I had been loved and worshipped and cherished as a God would, I remember a girl had told me about herself.

The girl who would give me a coin every week, and tell me about the soup she'd made. You may remember her from when I had talked to you before. Maybe I had not – it is all mixed up in this expanse of nothing now. I am cold, and memories are better preserved warm.

But the girl had told me about herself. She had told God's ear about pain and the bruises that lined her arms and legs, the eyes that taunted her to tear her apart, the fists that took her as weak – something that traveled through her body and made her weep as strongly as any burn would have.

I wonder if this is what the girl had been talking about.

It is strange. Before when I had been trapped in the darkness, I had wished for anyone to come. Anyone, anything, and even the beasts you had taught me about with their eight legs and their vicious eyes would have sufficed for company. Not as good of a company as yours, but still company.

But now it is a... strange position I have put myself in. I am confused as to my position, and I wish you would come dearly.

Years ago—months ago? Weeks? Without you, time seems nothing if not timeless—strange men with hair finer than the paint on my face and greedy eyes had intruded where I am now. The men (with smiles that thought of dimes and papers and slips people handed them to enter the chamber that was not theirs) were strange because they were like you and your companions. They dusted us, cleaned the floors, set oil lamps alight that never switched off to keep us in darkness again.

What am I supposed to say? I am popular once more. People want to hear God's ear once more, just... not the same way, I think. You had taught me about change. I believe this is all it is: change.

They worship God differently, and they see God's ear differently.

Things that do not change: speech, gazes, touching, rubbing. The astounded expressions. These are things that have not changed at all, and I would describe them to you in great detail but I know you have already heard these, and I do not wish for you to be bored. They look at me and I know they see in me what you had seen in me because they stare and point.

Things that do change: offerings, attention, and certain aspects of touching. The offerings they give me are tossed to my feet, indiscreetly, and come in the form of small silver bottles, transparent materials I have never seen before, paper that rustles and does not rip as easily. Sometimes they smell of food, and there is a strange liquid that seeps my feet and leaves them with a strange, biting sensation. I suppose these are offerings. Their attention and their touch are shown in other ways, too, because sometimes children lean over and they hold little metal objects in their hands, and these are sharp and they hurt the masterpiece you have made me into. They carve what paint you had shaped me with, and flecks tumble out of my body whenever they dig instruments into my skin. My body is drawn with shapes I do not recognize, and although I do not think this is what your question of beauty had been, I think... this is... art?

I think, I assume, this is the change you had told me about.

I am... only slightly afraid. I wish for you to come back and tell me this is normal, and nothing but the passage of time.

I miss your softer touch.

-

Dear You, who is somewhere far away, happier than you ever were with me,

Stars fall from my eyes every night.

Not tears. Never tears. You have carved me and you have made me. If the creator is someone so beautiful, there can never be a flaw that comes from their creation. Perfection cannot create imperfection, and I know this; I know that those that fall are not tears.

Stars fall, every night.

These two eyes that have never closed have never seen stars, either, but I know from the way you describe it that this is precisely what it is. Stars. They course down my cheeks and cut across my fragmented body, and in the span of months and years, they have carved down trails that they run down every day. Abundance creates familiarity, and the paint that you had called my cheeks is familiar with these stars that spill forth. Galaxies and space itself exist packed into silent stars that no one wipes away, and just like those who had been in here with me, my perfect edges are cut away by stars.

I am broken, and I am hurt, and I am not art. Not anymore.

You had told me the definition of art before. You demanded more of me, and before I had eagerly listened as you taught your first creation about your passion. You are art, you said, and because I was God's ear and proud and beautiful and made by you, touched by no one but you, I believed you. You are the beauty that graces those who long to see God. You are music for the eyes.

I believed you because that was what I was. Now I am not, and in your absence, I have become the ruins of what I know to be your lost city.

The children that gather their silver instruments to write words that do not matter on my skin, and pierce my delicate soul with their own, grubby fingers are not art. The coins that even older people grind against my fingertips are not art. The nails that pick at my paint, hoping to find a sliver for themselves, greedily taking my body that belongs to you and you only, is not art.

I am not art. This I realize now because I wish for you to come and paint me once more, to smooth over the hollow carvings of little children without their fathers and adults when they disregard the only thing you have left for me. I wish for you to come back and to reshape me in the form of God again, as proud as I was.

This makes me more afraid than the dark that once cradled me. Stars fall from my eyes every night, stars I wish you will whisk away.

I do not think it is possible, but I long to see you walk through the entrance someday.

-

Dear You, who I love,

Please do not come back.

Perhaps you will not remember me. I am not the glory you have once painted, and now, I am ashamed to say my figure is not one I am proud of. I feel, even in this vast and empty chamber I used to converse with you in, nude and stripped of any coverings.

I am a pitiful fragment of the God you had once blown into me. You will not see me as you once did, with affection. But I still remember you better than ever, and please know that I still hold the essence of what it was that you wished to capture.

No one prays to me anymore. It is fine because even with my body charred and my painted face laid bare, I know that I am still an ear—your ear—and God's ear. I know I was, and still am, worshipped. Treated like I should.

Please, do not return. I do not wish to see you like this.

I hope you are safe nonetheless, and wish nothing but the best.

Tales from the Mogao Grottoes – Emerald Eye

ESF Island School, Chung, Chianne – 14

As a child, Wang Yuanlu's grandfather had told him many stories about his great-grandfather's expeditions to the Mogao Grottoes. The stories of how he fought the aggressive natives and saved innocent people from getting hurt was one of Wang's favourite childhood stories. They were poor and even though they had come from many generations of officials and generals, their family was always tight on money, and fantasies about finding the grottoes again and helping his family always motivated Wang.

As he grew up, Wang aspired to be just like his ancestors and become an official of the government as well. He studied hard to get the position, and during this time he found an ancient map buried in one of the drawers in the corner of his house, what he believed to be a map left by his great-grandfather leading to the Mogao Grottoes.

In the year 1900, Wang Yuanlu stopped at the foot of the mountain of the Mogao Grottoes he had longed to see. He had been the only one to embark on this mission, as the Empress had ignored his request for a team of men so many times. He wiped the beads of sweat from his forehead and breathed a sigh of relief. Taking a swig of water from his pack, he kept climbing.

Arriving at the first cave, Wang eagerly stepped inside. A tall slanted roof made him feel impossibly small. Wonderful colours, murals, patterns and drawings covered the walls. At the far end, a statue at least twice his size stared back at him. It looked unbelievably real, Wang's stomach dropped for a brief while before coming back to his senses. He examined his surroundings and smiled at his success.

A few years later, development of the Silk Road had made travelling much easier. Businessmen from all over the world had come to China. Among them, an Englishman named Marc Stein had heard of the news of the grottoes and decided to come to Gansu to witness these historical treasures for himself. After a few days of searching, he finally found Wang's office. It was a tight space overflowing with books and stacks of paper from his research. Stein maneuvered his way through the mountains of paperwork until he reached Wang's desk. The man looked up at him, fixing his glasses. He was almost two times smaller than Stein himself, hunched over his desk over a bundle of ancient jewellery. Upon seeing him, the man wrapped his arms around the treasures, attempting to hide them. His features were mouse-like, with tiny eyes, a thin and pointy nose, and protruding teeth. He wore robes which were much too big for him, and his shoes made him look like he belonged in a cartoon. Mustering a smile, Wang said, 'Greetings, sir. How can I help you?' Clearing his throat, Stein said, 'I heard you are selling the artefacts from the Mogao Grottoes. I'm looking to place a few of them inside my countries' museum.' Wang's eyes lit up and he shook Stein's hand with enthusiasm. 'I can get you there in two days.'

Over the next few days, Wang prepared enough provisions for the journey and Stein packed all he needed from the huge suitcases he had brought. On a particularly warm day, they set off on their horses. The journey through the Gansu plains was surprisingly pleasant. The temperature was just right and the wars were slowly subsiding, despite a few battles left and right. Wang and Stein avoided those routes, which extended their journey by a day. The journey was long, but eventually they made it to the grottoes.

Stein got off from his horse and Wang began to lead him into the first cave. They each had their own mysterious aura, neither welcoming nor discouraging. Still, Stein felt reluctant to venture on. He felt intimidated by these caves, but had come too far to turn back now. He continued following Wang.

The men reached the end of the cave. Stein looked around. The artefacts were covered with dust and cobwebs, and the details were so muddled that you could barely see them. The men coughed a few times from the dust. Wang took a brush from his pocket and went up to a particular statue, then started brushing the face of the statue with it. As the dust was slowly swept away, Stein saw the intricate details of the face: beautiful sparkling eyes, a small pointed nose and rosy lips. The colour had worn away but the craftsmanship was apparent. He observed the statue for a few minutes. It had been worn and beaten down from many years of being inside the cave, and it had to be at least a few centuries old. It was definitely worthy of being inside his museum. Although he had many suspicions about Wang, he was starting to believe him. 'We can explore some of the other caves before you make a decision, Mr. Stein.' Stein nodded and they began leaving the cave.

As they were nearing the entrance, the cave rumbled and shook. Sharp rocks and boulders fell from the top, crushing artefacts. 'It's an earthquake,' Wang screamed. 'Run!' Without looking back, Wang escaped from the cave like a snake, fast and agile. Stein however, had a much bigger build and was not as much of a runner. Before he could make it to the entrance, rocks had blocked the entrance and it was impossible to leave. Stein yelled for Wang again and again, but he had left him behind. As he looked behind him, all the precious artefacts had been crushed except for the statue of the girl, she seemed to be staring at him intently. The earthquake stopped, and Stein was trapped inside.

Stein looked around the cave for anything to get out. In front of him was a two-metre wall of boulders. Stein cursed himself for trusting Wang so quickly. Wang had obviously left as quickly as possible, as he did not even call for Stein after the earthquake had ended. From his peripheral, Stein spotted something shifting. He snapped his head backwards and stared at the statue. It couldn't be possible that it had moved on its own. And so he kept studying the wall of rocks. But it moved again. This time, he looked back and shouted, 'Who is there?' Then he realised, the eyes of the statue were glowing an emerald green, and it was slowly separating from its stone bottom. Stein ran over to it, and he saw that the statue had been struck open at the back by a sharp stone. A bright light came shooting from the back and the ceramic slowly broke open. A pair of hands started to pry the two ends of the ceramic open, and Stein looked on in horror. A girl with emerald eyes and jet black hair emerged from the ceramic. She looked young and old, a combination of all beings. When she spoke, it was a hoarse voice, which sounded like many voices speaking together. 'Finally, I'm free,' she said, cracking her knuckles. 'I can finally kill that man, Wang.' Stein was confused. 'What's going on? Who are you?' 'A god. Wang's great great grandfather sealed me in here many centuries ago. My power is what fuels these caves, and I am what gave people the creativity to make these artworks. I lived here among the people, but when Wang came across these caves with his army. He wanted all this to himself, so he killed everybody. He sealed me inside this statue, but I managed to use my final breath to make a spell, and I protected a few caves. The rest... it was all taken away, sold or destroyed. Now I must take my revenge. After this, I will not be here to protect the caves anymore. Please, take good care of the artefacts for me. put them in a museum where people can admire them.' Without another word, she lifted the boulders and left the cave.

Wang paced around in his office, muttering to himself. What had happened to the caves? Were the artefacts still intact? Would he be held accountable for Stein's death? Just as he was thinking, a woman dressed in black qipao appeared. 'What do you want?' Wang snapped. As he spoke, he realised this was no ordinary woman. She emanated a peculiar aura, and the way she moved was different from that of a human. She slashed at his eyes, and at that moment Wang knew he was going to die. He was sure that it was because of his and his ancestors' sins. She slashed at him again and again with her hands. He breathed his last breath and the goddess, having fulfilled her purpose, melted away into thin air. Centuries of waiting had tired her.

At the grottoes, Stein was packing everything he could from the caves into the cloth that he had brought. He carefully climbed out of the cave from the path the goddess had made. After filling up bags of jewellery, books and drawings, Stein loaded them onto his horses and rode away into the night. The museum would pay him quite a hefty amount for these exotic artefacts. He did not forget to take a piece of the ceramic the goddess had broken out from, which later became one of the most famous pieces to come from the Mogao Grottoes— "Emerald Eye".

Tales from the Mogao Grottoes – Lead, Don't Submit

ESF Island School, Palshetkar, Vaibhavi – 14

The trees spotted the pale face of the mountains I crossed days ago. Even as I left the sights of the peaks, they never left mine. The indistinguishable rocky path in front of me continued. It stretched as far as my vision would have supported me. With every step I took, I could minuscule grains of sand enter my worn boots. It was imperative that I replace them. The picturesque icy mountain behind was eventually replaced by a small sandy mountain in the distance. The clouds covered the wintry peak, ever emphasising its sheer size and left me pondering what I could have hoped to find at the top, had I ever attempted to traipse it. I traversed the Silk Road, a network of trade routes which, in a time long ago, linked the grandiose land of China to the West. The Silk Road did not only include land routes, but sea routes too, a journey I did not yet have the gall to take. It remained a true entrance of religion into China, bringing Buddhism and Christianity along with numerous treasures. And here I was, as I explored the path which had hoisted many to a life of luxury. Perhaps it would do the same for me.

While the Silk Road was no more than a road scrawled in History textbooks today, it was crystal clear that mysteries remained dormant near it. I would be the one to add my contributions to history in that same textbook. My safety was not guaranteed, and that was the reason why so many had never travelled the long-forgotten road.

I relied on my navigational skills to traverse a path that was not immediately clear, a decision that would result in the discovery of knowledge never before seen.

I soon realised the resplendence of the view around me as I ventured further into the road that pierced the mountains. They surrounded me, while the breeze whispered a chilling melody in my ear. As the road continued, the prodigious white mountains soon left my sights. My feet soon felt the absence of vehicular pleasures that I had once become accustomed to. This journey was one I took to gain back those pleasures, so I would not give up just yet. My fall from grace would not be eternal. This land—this scenery—was not to be enjoyed momentarily, but through the pace of one's feet. I underwent several hours worth of walking to reach the sandy mountain I saw from so far away.

I approached the mountain at a snail's pace. It was not a mountain, but a sand dune. At its foot, I spotted a curiously shaped lake. Sweat formed at my temples, racing down my face. My breaths became heavier as the minutes passed, a tell-tale sign of fatigue. I had, after all, been on this unpaved road for what felt like an millenium. Visions of everlasting respect and power formed in my mind. Visions of success. Visions of fame. My feet mindlessly positioned themselves in front of the other. I clutched my crumpled map, and hoped to decipher where my navigational skills had now led me. The map, hand-drawn by a cartographer, was sketched in black and white. It charted the Silk Road, and the peaks that surrounded it. The crescent shape of the lake led me to believe it was the *Mingsha* mountain. Sand dunes that beat a thumping drum and that sung a sacred song could be heard here, according to what I had once read. Not a sight witnessed by everyone on their travels.

I was to camp here today. The magnificence of the oasis tempted me to spend the night. I gazed at the shimmering sky, which had begun to set in. The trees swung side to side, in sync with the song of the dune. The sun gradually sank into the horizon. It took along with it the radiance of the day. The moon's gentle glow now cloaked everything under it. I slept rather swiftly to waive off my drastic fatigue. The ongoing rhythm of drums added to the serenity of the lake's crystalline water.

While I set up my necessities, I briefly paused to enjoy the view around me. Behind the curiously shaped lake, I spotted a strange structure. I looked to my map for guidance. Alas, no such location was charted in the pitch black ink.

I found it. My *magnum opus*.

From my viewing of the *Mingsha* sand dune, I comprehended that objects far away did in fact have the potential to fill one's vision. The same, I hoped would apply for my discovery.

At the crack of dawn, I was energised with optimism anew, and I travelled to the site I saw behind the lake last evening. I set off as soon as possible. I hoped to make it there by noon.

I hastened my steps, and the once minuscule structure filled my entire view. There was a singular building, overlapping walls of stone behind it. Lined with red and black at its underside, the roof's corners turned upwards.

The cotton-covered sky above shone light on the wall behind it. It brought out the dimension and the caution put into building this magnificent edifice. I walked around the structure, and hoped that its exterior would disclose secrets unseen from the front. However, this structure was not independent from the stone behind it, it was built inside it. The walls almost swallowed the building whole, as it desperately attempted to contain the secrets within it.

I remained at a standstill, and as I admired the structure, I registered that the building, while magnificent, was lonesome. No souls lingered close to the building or near the lake I had slumbered at. This lack of public attention meant I had a brief period of freedom to perhaps uncover the secrets the building withheld. I promptly entered the building, elated at the notion of fame and fortune.

A set of stairs to the left led the way. I promptly began to climb them, jittery to uncover what lay dormant within. I walked until I stood in front of a door just barely taller than me. It was made of stone, and had a cream colour, age etched upon its surface. I peered at the room itself. It was primarily orange, with countless *bodhisattvas* posed in countless ways across the walls. Some danced, while others played instruments. Some sat, while others stood. The centre of the west wall was inhabited by a concave space, occupied by a large *Buddha* statue a tad bit shorter than me. It sat cross-legged. The left hand rested on the left thigh, while the right was open and raised about halfway up the torso. The palm faced me, as if the statue wanted to bless me. Behind the statue, illustrated into the concave wall was a perfectly symmetrical drawing of a throne-like structure, surrounded by many more *bodhisattvas*.

While the illustrations were visible, the elements had clearly had an effect on them. Some parts of the walls had strange markings on them that were the result of their long life. They however didn't taint the illustrations, they instead told me more about their foregone times than any old text could ever have. The ceiling was indented in the shape of a square. Inside it was a diamond, in the centre which had more shapes. There were people there that resembled merpeople, and I pondered how such a Western influence adorned the ceiling.

I managed to pull myself away from the room. The other copious caves that could tell me more.

Hours after exploring the numerous caves, with countless *Buddhas* and even more countless *bodhisattvas*, I understood what this place was. They were numerous caves that documented China's history. China was one of the oldest civilizations to have ever existed, and yet I never thought to question its rich and condensed tales. The caves I had visited so far had slowly but surely pieced together gaps in my knowledge I was unaware that existed. Not a trace of sleep was visible on my face, for my interest was far too piqued in obtaining a full picture. I could finally see the fragmented parts of my life slowly fitting into each other, like puzzle pieces. Pictures of wine in my cellar snapped in and out of existence. I could see, from my perspective, wine swirling in my stemware, its rich and maroon colour shimmering at the surface, like a ruby.

These countless caves soon became more majestic as I continued upward. I took the first set of stairs I saw and as soon as I explored the floor, I moved on. This became a cycle I could not break, because of the mere thought of humans painting these murals and sculpting these statues. I soon crossed paths with a cave. A cave, despite the countless caves with resplendent drawings, I considered some of the most important and impressive art and sculptures I had seen in my time here. This cave gave off a stronger sense of age than the others. The walls were coated in a thick layer of dust; they coated the vibrant hues of the walls. The stains on the yellow wall textured the smooth paint. Immaculately patterned walls lined two-thirds of each wall. Alternating *bodhisattvas* were placed, and despite their grand numbers, I speculated I was going to see more than just these. Illustrations of camels with worthy wares traversed the Silk Road, painting a picture of the Silk Road, and those long-forgotten times. I wished to earn back my place as a scholar. The people would forget my 'fall from grace', as they called it. These people who walked the road, they were not unlike me. Each of them had something to gain by traversing the Silk Road, and I did too.

The top of the entrance into the room had a shape that looked like goat horns, painted in black, with green accents surrounding it. I looked to the walls at the side of the entrance. These shapes were hard to decipher, but they were illustrations of people in long robes. They either clutched something dearly, or prayed to a godlike entity, which, through my assumptions, could have been *Buddha*. From my limited knowledge of Chinese, I attempted to read the *hanzi*. I deciphered, from the muddled text and unclear characters, that it referenced a date. I studied the text scrawled on the wall, but I could not understand these ancient scripts, and resolved to explore the rest of the room. From my first look, the focus of the room was the front and main chambers. There was a hollow in the ceiling, which I soon realised was a ceiling shaded with darker paint than the wall, which gave it dimension. However, even that assumption was wrong. The parts of the ceiling felt like they were torn from the piece in a fit of rage. The edges remained to tell a story, parts of which missed their time to shine. In the centre of the room stood a pillar. A conical

shape perforated the ceiling, not unlike a drill. Its shape gave me the impression that it had the ability to spin around and sink deeper until it reached the next floor. Dragon-like entities held up the massive structure, and at eye-level laid the statue of a headless *Buddha* clothed in regal red robes, surrounded by two *bodhisattvas*. It was devastating and slightly terrifying to see these statues without their heads. They told a more detailed picture of the story alongside the destructively torn illustrations on the ceiling.

I promptly left the cave, filled with notions of how such grandiose history could have been damaged. Heads missing, walls torn... What other details had I missed? Could it have been a rebellion against Buddhism? I left the cave, countless questions in the back of my mind.

Night had fallen once more. The once bright corridors now turned into a never ending void that threatened to suck me in, had I the impudence to enter. I had garnered enough knowledge to piece together a picture of these caves. Soon, people would pay millions just to visit. To understand China's vast history. My 'fall from grace' would be a thing of the past, and the people who looked down on me with their stone-cold glares would be at my beck and call. My aim was now achieved, and I prepared to head back to the lake I had rested at before.

I took a different route around the caves. Outside, the night air cooled my face. The wind whistled, and the canopies of the trees swayed in tune. My quickened steps and the chilling air did not cure my lust for knowledge, and I almost walked past a cave which had the most impressive entrance I had ever spotted. Four tall pillars supported the roof. And the dark night made the colours look darker than I really thought. Some parts of the structure sparkled, while others absorbed the moon's faint glow. The walls were made of stone and metal. Instead of going back to the lake, my thirst for knowledge got the better of me, and I spent the remainder of my night slumbering under the roof of the structure. My mind attempted to convince me that this was not a thirst for knowledge, but the need to overwhelm my peers with evidence and descriptions of my findings. While the night air still crashed into me, at least my head was okay. I planned to visit my doctor for a checkup and make sure I had not caught a cold on my journey here.

The next morning, I convinced myself this was the last cave I was going to visit. This was the last one. This was the final cave. I would not come back to these caves again unless I had to. I was finished with consolidating my knowledge.

As I entered the cave, I hoped this would prove enough for me to be accepted by my peers once more. All my life, I had spent learning about humanity and those we follow, and yet, that knowledge did not help me to prevent my past mistakes. I was greeted by a long hallway, with shiny wooden floors. Opposite the entrance lay, once again, a statue of *Buddha* surrounded by others circling him. At both of His feet lay two others. Protecting the altar were stacks of books. On top of one of them lay a piece of parchment with a detailed illustration. It was detailed with abstract patterns like flowers, vines and clouds. Men laid on clouds, and numerous others stood behind *Buddha*, as He sat in front of a table. This was much older than the other texts here. There was so much to uncover. So many blanks to fill. So much for me to gain. But, I would lead an expedition here in the future. Now was not the time. I simply had to bring back the seed of the tree that I would plant. I reached out toward the piece of parchment. This was a piece of parchment, and yet, I felt hesitant to take it for myself. But, what would I present to my peers when I told them about my journey to these caves? I quickly grabbed the parchment, and retraced my steps back to the room to the north wall, where I had spotted a room.

The first thing I spotted was a statue. This was not a *Buddha* statue, like the numerous rooms I had previously been to. This one was different. This one's hair was not made of snail shells, but none at all, as was usually expected of monks in *Buddhist* tradition. This one also sat on a simple surface. No *bodhisattvas*, or anything else that resembled the paintings and structures I'd seen during the previous day. Instead of repeating patterns, grey walls filled the room. The only coloured illustration in the room was a picture of trees behind the statue and pedestal beneath it. To the right of the wall was a dark grey stone. Carved into it were *hanzi* characters. I deciphered only a few words such as *Dazhong*, which was an era among countless in China's history. I also figured out, after peering at the text, that the individual who sat upon the altar was Monk *Hong Bian*. This seemed to be a memorial for him, as he had accomplished great feats in his lifetime. I paid my respects to the statue, and turned on my heel to leave for the curiously shaped lake. As I took steps away from the room, I was reminded of the four noble truths, the foundation of *Buddhism*.

The truth of suffering

The truth of the cause of suffering

The truth of the end of suffering

The truth of the path that leads to the end of suffering

Humans are vain creatures, and they shan't cease to be. My reason for coming here was to regain the support of my peers, after they shunned me. I shan't live like this any longer. I won't be accepted back into their ranks. For all I knew, they could simply leech off me, building upon the future I so desperately craved. This was history, but this history was not mine to share. My suffering would not be the thing that would lead everyone here. I looked at the parchment I clutched in my palm. This secret was not mine to share, and so I wouldn't.

I left the caves. I had knowledge that I had nothing to do with. I craved to know more. My lust for knowledge was never ending, and I resolved to learn more by practising *Buddhism*.

And so, I learned to lead, not submit, to my dreams.

Tales from the Mogao Grottoes – Awoke of Buddha Guardian

ESF Island School, Sun, Lily – 15

In 366 A.D. A monk named “Le Chun” travelled past the mountain and suddenly saw thousands of Buddha's real appearances from far away. Dazzling golden light circling over like ten thousand Buddhas. He prayed gracefully and decided to carve the first “Grottoes” on a rock wall in return for Buddha's directions.

After days of he's meticulously carvings, I came alive! In the middle of night, I opened my stiff eyes. There was a strange two feet creature wearing a bright yellow long dangling dress with a red cassock on top. He's hitting some large stones with those unique tools. What's more weird is he's hairless, so I slowly picked up my heavy foot. Crack! The noise had alerted the man, he suddenly turned around, glancing around the room. Nothing. Nothing was there, only a shining moon slipping through the carved windows. He returned carving the buddha again, it was a buddha that has a skin white as snow with bright red cassock each decorated with gold stripes. He was sitting in front of a blue, green, silver, gold and red circular patterned background, the patterns surrounding the buddha as if that was the real goddess visiting us adding a brush of colours to this mundane. My eyelids became heavier and heavier, uncontrollably closing faster and faster. Until the two feet creature became a blurry figure continuously using unique tools hitting the large stone. Everything became pitch dark, it was all peaceful, safe and sound.

Sunlight sneaked through the windows, birds chirping their joyful song. I scavenged around for that two feet creature, he was gone. But he left the colours and beautiful creations behind, the large stone he was craving that night became a Buhdda sitting on a glamorous background and chair. As I stand next to it as if a guardian of that Buddha, carefully I lift my heavy feet off the light pink Lily flower seat. My feet screeched on the floor as I dragged my massive body across the cave explorIng for any statues which come alive like me. Bang! A small black shadow dashed out of the cave, I immediately chased after the shadow.

Until I saw a small dark grey skinned living creature, it was so small that it was only one finger long. All of a sudden it escaped from me, sliding off my hand and disappearing in the distance.

I stared at the distance that the creature left for a long time, until my eyes were sore and dry, the feelings started again. Blinding my vision, my head felt heavier and heavier, I fell down hard on my side hearing the cracks on my stone cold arm.

Sun was beaming on my face, wind softly blowing near my face, like a mother gently kissin my face. Years went by, memories still flashes back the first time meeting the two odd looking creatures who can move like me now. Hefty sounds of gharry are coming towards this cave, I quickly hid myself behind one tree nearby. Peaking through the leaves wondering who is making these sounds. Only to see disappointment, there was nothing like other statues like me coming alive. Just several groups of two feet creatures were lining up in a straight line where five creatures and two other brown furry four feet creatures were holding the gharry.

This time everyone was wearing clothes made out of silk and golden sides stuck on each sleeve. And they all had those black hair on every single creature. There was not a single sound made by them, except the footsteps, clinking sound as they moved towards the cave.

I hurried back on to my light Lily flower seat that the bold two feet creature had made for me, postured back to a single leg standing position I was created in. Footsteps and that noisy clinking sound on the gharry came closer and closer finally coming to a stop. I peaked with one of my eyes open, and dozens of people stepped into the cave. They were each sitting down with their legs crossed on to the three allocated seats in front of Buddha, each murmuring something in a soft voice. Suddenly bowing to every single direction of the cave, I thought to myself did they see me? Or were they trying to capture statues like me who came alive?

They left the cave without a sound as I took another closer look, but returned with a three wheeled pushing cart, and a bunch of weird and unique looking tools. Some are sharp, I recognized one of them. It has a sharp tip which was that bold looking two feet creature used to make the Buddha. In a blink of an eye, they started banging, digging all sorts of places, soon I was manipulated by these sounds and fastened asleep again. I woke up surprised by the spectacular decorations, fine arts, and superb statues each looked as if it would come alive all of a sudden.

On the ceilings there were legendary imperial loongs and phoenix flying freely in the sky, fighting for territories. Plenty of Buddhas and Guardians were added, there was a small buddha which caught my eyes. He was wearing a bright red paofu both neck and sleeves were decorated with a rare blue color. Hands put

in front of his crossed sitting legs, and eyes are closed gently. From far away, it's like a buddha came here only to meditate for the goods of this world. Intently, a young girl ran in front of me staring as if I was a real person that will give her candies after looking through her sparkling grape sized eyes, her snow white red cheeks and two chubby hands. Immediately, after no sign of my movement she started crying rapidly and rolling from one side to another. Waiting for my response, I still stayed frozen. A young two feet creature with long hair came running in, and dragged the kid by its hand to pull it away from me murmuring the same language they used to her. She left with only miserable and pity of not seeing me responding to her, there wasn't any sign of excitement anymore.

I hopped off the seat, leaning behind a pillar watching them all gather in front of the cave, picking and clearing up all the mess they've made. Some people climbed into the gharry, some picked up their spiky weapons and departed from this cave. Finally, after days of screeching and ear bleeding noises, now I can get a proper nice sleep.

A yellow light glowing Buddha was speaking that weird language to me, but I could understand it the Buddha said: "My mission to this world is protect the people who are kind and mostly needed help with or let a wish come true, but this help/wish would risk my life, either I chose to live forever to be selfish or help the people needed support." "And those two feet creatures are called humans or peoples, they will be ones you'll be helping as they pray to you besides you, but only grant them if they actually deserve it." I woke up instantly thinking it might just be some nightmares or dreams which I get when I'm being a light sleeper.

No, it wasn't a dream, there were plenty of people walking into the massive Mogao caves one after another. They were all wearing rough fabric clothes each wearing a straw hat on their head. As each of them takes turns sitting down on those seats, I start to hear them murmur. Except I can hear them clearly, some are asking for eternal wealth, getting a wife at age of 25, passing number one scholar school and all kinds of wishes which are impossible to succeed. Although, my hearts were aching heavily from not being able to help them, at the same time feeling useless that a gurdiance of a Buddha can't even resolve a small wish from each person. I repeatedly told myself "With great power comes great responsibility!" I should never be using my power for any other reasons or purposes just to show I am not useless, since Buhdda told me if the power granted for me is used to break the natural's law then it will be taken away from me and I would turn back to a heartless statue again.

I enjoyed watching everyone from far away insist on coming every morning for prayings or maybe playing purposes outside of the caves for kids. It was alway so glamorous and peaceful, until the Yuan dynasty. Mogao caves stopped growing, no one ever came back even the people or little kids I see every morning were gone. I hurried down the seat accidentally tripping over a stone and my arm started to crack even more. The pain spreaded through my whole body, but there was no time to waste. I rushed outside stepping on a tall rock looking from above finding any type of the two feet creatures(peoples) existence. All I saw was nothing, I didn't give up every morning. I would stand in the same place searching all over again only to find disappointment. Days of disappearance of these two feet creatures(peoples) I was defeated by the time, since one day always seemed like a year.

Slowly, entrances of the caves were blocked by dust built year by year, windows were sealed by the rapidly growing leaves and my power slowly dripped away until my whole body became cold again. I asked myself, Why did the humans never come back again? Was it because of my cold hearted actions that none of their wishes came true or I was just too useless to do anything? Will they ever find this place again? These faded away gently as my consciousness slipped away slowly.

Two large groups of armies are roaring their country's name over and over again, as if they had already won the war. As the drum beat started aggressively rumbling the war has begun and it is time to fight for their lives. Armies raising their sword and shield fiercely running towards the opposite armies, bloods were spilt everywhere, dead bodies are like rapid growing grasses spreading everywhere. Leaving a strong blood smell as you walk past them, blood steins had made the soil turning from light brown to dark black color.

Family members who are waiting outside their homes for their own husbands only see clothings that is ripped and cutted into pieces with blood stains all over it, or husbands who look like a 40 year old man using a stick to walk step by step.

The Emperor is still playing with his pet lion, and all those rare animals from the western trades, but still isn't pleasant with the amount he has. Gives orders to trade some more luxurious items from the western

using the silk road. Everyone hated this emperor, but no one dared to make a single disagreement, all knowing their heads would fall the second before they spoke anything. But no one seemed to care about the Mogao Grottoes, it seemed like everyone was way too busy to think of me, or I'm just too purposeless to be remembered unlike the Buddha's...

Tales from the Mogao Grottoes – The Guardian’s Tale

ESF Island School, Tsai, Maddie – 14

366 CE

Someone is calling, a warm voice with an echo that seems to reverberate through my mind. My senses gradually clear and the fog seems to lift. I can feel every bone and muscle in... a body, my body? I will myself to move, but find that I can't seem to control my muscles. Where am I? What is this? The echo grows louder, and abruptly I'm aware of a pull tugging from my core. For a brief moment, I can feel myself moving, though not of my own accord, and all of a sudden, I'm blinded by a bright gold. I can see! Once the light has faded I take in my surroundings. Green grass sways with wind I cannot feel, and small waterfalls sparkle with light I cannot see. Right in front of me, a pond covered in the soft pink of lilies. The garden, for that is what it must be, is silent for all but the bright gurgling of the water. It finally occurs to me to take a look at myself. I give another attempt at movement, and this time, my muscles comply. Uncurling myself from the heap I had been in, I peek over the pond. For my efforts, I'm greeted by the sight of a beak and a bright red crest. Cautiously, I let my wings spread out on either side of me. My plumage is breathtaking, made up of bright royal blues, scarlet reds, emerald greens and warm honey golds.

“Phoenix.” A voice shakes me out of my awe and I startle, letting out a sharp caw.

Turning, I'm faced with a serene face looking down on me from upon his lotus, around his head a golden halo.

Instinctively, I bow my head respectfully. “Buddha”

His hand reaches down as he strokes my crest. “Rise.” I lift my head and he smiles gently before he begins to speak.

“I have brought you here to fulfil a great duty that will help many in their journey to enlightenment... to be a protector and a guardian of the Cave of a Thousand Buddhas. The good monk Le Zun will be the beginning of a divine site that will lead those seeking awakening and freedom from the shackles of suffering, and you, my dear Phoenix, shall watch over his work and look after this holy spot.”

Somehow, I know what I will say without even thinking about it. This is my purpose. Taking a deep bow, I utter words that seal my fate. “It would be the highest honor to take on this great responsibility Buddha”, and with another tug, the garden around me falls away.

394 CE

The prosperous city of Dunhuang sprawls beneath me, as I gracefully glide under the sweltering sun. I can see the tiny white specks of caravans making their way across the sand, heading towards the oasis for the weary travellers. With a flap of my wings, I fly south east towards the caves.

Le Zun had died years ago, but his work lived on. He'd been on the pilgrimage to the Western Paradise when he'd stopped by the Dachuan river, where I found him. I'd watched as he took gulps of water to quench his thirst from the long journey, and rested on the shaded river bank at the foot of the Sanwei mountain. As the final rays of liquid gold spilled over the summit of the mountain, we were graced with the vision. Maitreya Buddha beamed down at us, surrounded by a thousand Buddhas, right palms raised. Heavenly music seemingly played from nowhere, and fairies danced about in between, basking in the golden light. Le Zun had silently kneeled in reverence as a tear rolled down his cheek, vowing to establish a sacred place of worship for the Buddha. For the rest of his life, I would observe as he would work tirelessly to build the first cave into the cliff opposite the site of the holy vision, filling it with depictions of his blessed vision.

Nearing the grottoes, I can see another monk making his way towards the mountain. Swooping down low, I follow him as he reaches the sandy river bank. The sun is quickly setting, painting the sky with fiery hues. I hold my breath as the monk looks up just as Le Zun had. The fading sunset turns iridescent, and the mountain glistens and sparkles from a light of unknown origin. Again, Maitreya Buddha appears in a resplendent golden aura, still smiling down at us as his left hand rests on his crossed legs. The light shines, luminescent, on the cliff opposite, bringing the monk's

attention to the depictions Le Zun had left behind. Just as soon as he turns, the dazzling light vanishes. Surviving in nothing but a mere memory deeply engraving itself into the monk. This monk was filled with the same wonder I'd seen in Le Zun, and I knew he would continue the former's work.

907 CE

The sun is peeking up over the mountain, and the first rays throw the cliffs into a warm glow. The stories of the two monks' visions have spread across the nation, and people from every station and every region now come and visit. I've watched dynasties come and go, as the number of caves grew exponentially. Layers and layers of sandstone chipped away under my vigilant eye, generations of men and women travelling thousands of miles from their homes to visit the divine spot. Over a thousand caves were added to the original, each elaborately decorated and painted with care, filled with scriptures and sculptures, and walls covered with murals.

I spy a small group of monks carrying armfuls of scrolls make their way to the caves, along a familiar path walked by millions before them. They enter through the first cave, which has been made into a multiple story temple with bright red roof tiles that remind me of my own feathers. The caves have never been more alive, and with them, me. With every new cave that is built, I feel my energy grow, tied to this blessed spot. No matter which dynasty it is, I will continue to look over my caves, respecting the promise I made ever so long ago.

1640 CE

I'm tired. It took a good couple hundred of years for me to notice, but I can feel it now, weighing down my very soul. The duty that was bestowed upon me has made me weary, and the caves have been forgotten by all but a few. I should have realised when the construction of caves stopped. The road that used to bring thousands through my dearest caves now brings a few local monks on a good day. Dunhuang has been reduced to nothing more than a small village, a far cry from the prosperous trading hub it used to be. It's funny how time works, those minute changes that you disregard, until it's too late. Many of the caves have been abandoned, deemed as too much trouble for the small group that still visit. Perhaps this was always going to happen... I am well over a thousand years old. Every day, I grow weaker, clinging on to the last shred of hope that the caves will be revived. I know that no such miracle will happen. My fate has always been tied to the caves, and now that they have been deserted, so have I. Flying into a cave, I quickly find a small nook that seems around my size. I settle into it, tucking my head into my faded feathers and closing my eyes. Everything feels so exhausting... I can feel myself slipping, further and further. Feeling the tug, as I did all those years ago, I surrender.

1900 CE

There's a voice. It pierces through the haze that dulls my mind and my awareness floats back in bits and pieces. I haven't awoken in two hundred years, why now? Looking around, I see nobody in the cave that I'm in, but there's definitely someone. A scratching sound reaches my ears, and I trace it to a small crack on the wall. Who's behind it? I fly through the wall and finally find the source of the sound. It's owner is a man in his 50s, wearing loose fitting robes and a cap to cover his shaved head. A holy man then, I realise in relief. The cave I had been in was blocked with sand, and he was scratching away at it using a small shovel. This was unusual... in my semi-conscious state I'd been aware of people coming and going, but none of it had been enough to pull me out of my torpor. What was so special about this man?

1909 CE

Betrayal, and anger is all I feel. I'm burning with pulsing hot rage as I watch the man that had woken me, load cart after cart of documents. The precious documents! I knew he didn't understand the significance, being illiterate, but to blindly give it away, all for a couple dollars? They are not his to give! Each manuscript, so carelessly stacked onto the rusty trolley, feels like a brutal stab through my breast. This is not leading holy men to enlightenment! This was sacrilege, desecration, of work so tirelessly worked on by monks! The thieves in question not only clearly know nothing about the contents of the documents they have taken, but hope to use it for their personal gain! I watch in silent horror as paintings around the caves are taken down and thrown into the carts, along with textiles and sculptures. This cannot be. I must be in some sort of nightmare. Filled with grief, I let out a loud cry that won't be heard, I feel a tear trace its way down my face. I'm hopeless, unable to interfere, unable to turn away.

1939 CE

It's happening again, soldiers jeeringly vandalizing yet another precious mural as they joke with each other. They had been stationed here some months ago, this small group of young men with cruel faces. Within a month, they'd tired of their card games, and turned to destroying various statues and artwork. I no longer feel anything towards them. Numb. This isn't new. After the first betrayal, a stream of other thieves and vandals had passed through, each leaving a permanent scar of what had been lost. Murals stripped from walls and statues carelessly broken. I had watched each of these being created, the long hours of hard work, the effort and love poured into each and every piece. All to be destroyed within minutes. Is this my fate? To watch, as all that I had once watched grow and prosper be ripped away cruelly?

Present Day

The caves have survived, and so have I. Thankfully, a small group had come in not long after the soldiers had left, for once with no selfish intentions. After poking around the caves, and what seemed to be many observations, a steady flow of people had arrived. While not particularly holy men themselves, they worked hard at repairing and protecting the site, and I give them my gratitude. From then on, there was no more destruction. People began to come through the caves again, this time not for enlightenment, but out of appreciation for the caves themselves. The caves will never return to the divine beacon of holiness that they once were, but for now, they are safe, and no longer mine to protect. The thought is strangely calming, I think, as I close my eyes for what is hopefully the final time.

Tales from the Mogao Grottoes

ESF King George V School, Guo, Summer – 14

Wind howled, stirring currents of dust up and above the horizon, clouding the setting sun. A boy trudged through the deep sand, parched and delirious from starvation. He had been travelling with his brother and father, trading precious silk and treasured gemstones at neighbouring cities. It had only been a few days since their departure from the bustling city of Xi'an when their beloved camel collapsed, weary from old age. Eventually the boy was left all alone, the burden of loss weighing heavily on his shoulders. He could feel the last of his strength disappearing when he stumbled; tumbling down the sand hill. A faint aroma drifted through the air. Sweet dates, he thought, crawling up. Probing open his eyes, the figures of date trees slowly emerging, wispy in the distance. How cruel, the boy thought, these must be hallucinations to tempt me. Still, he scrambled towards them. When he glimpsed green and noticed the small pool of clear blue, the boy fell to his knees, thanking his god. Lapping furiously from the lake and feasting from fallen dates, he soon slept like a man that was dead.

As the first threads of light sparkled against the shining lake, the boy was jolted awake by a strange grumbling. Peering around, he saw an old man like the people in Xi'an city, thin and pale yellow. His hair had gone grey and his beard looked wispy and well kept, and around him flocked sulky-faced sheep. Speaking in that foreign language, the old man pointed leisurely at a direction before ambling away. Drowsy and confused, the boy assumed the old man must have come from a village nearby and was directing him there, so he walked in the direction after mumbling his thanks. For a while, nothing but the rugged desert and scent of dates surrounded him as the lake drifted further away. Then, the boy glimpsed a structure in the distance, growing in size as he approached. Soon he could see a crowd of small mountains, some with strange dents in the rock. He realised they were holes burrowing into the mountain, like a rabbit's den. What a strange village, the boy wondered in awe.

Not a sound could be heard as the boy entered one of the caves. The walls were lathered with mud, now dried and cool to the touch. Nothing but the morning light illuminated the cosy room and there were strange markings on the walls, faded but clearly illustrating a story. He could see characters- a tiger and one of the Buddhas the boy saw in the houses and stores of people in Xi'an city. Looking through the neighbouring caverns, the boy saw more drawings on the wall, but still no people. The boy realised this was no village, and so settling down in the cave, he planned to rest and regain strength before leaving for Khotan. Khotan was the kingdom that his father had planned to stop at after they left Xi'an. Laying his head on the sack with the stack of silk his brother had traded for, the boy closed his eyes.

However, sleep didn't come, no matter how he tossed and turned. In frustration, he banged his fist against the wall, only to find it wasn't quite as strong as he had imagined. A strange echo resonated, rousing his curiosity. Grabbing the trusty pick from his sack, he got to work breaking through the wall.

The sun had been covered by the blanket of darkness by the time the boy poked through the wall. With each strong push, he saw dirt crumbling until finally, the wall fell like a landslide. Falling with the momentum, he felt soft fabric under his hands. Could it be precious silk of some sort, a rustic robe perhaps? But no, as the boy uncovered what was hidden in the cave walls, he realised there were rows of scrolls, covered with dust. Flipping open the pages, he could only understand the word 'buddha'. The boy was not dull-witted, and knowing how popular the religion was, he guessed the books would sell for much. Humming, he stuffed the most he could carry into the sack, and soon fell asleep from sheer exhaustion. The next few days, the boy explored more of the caves, hoping to find more "treasure" to sell at Khotan. Though there was nothing like the precious books, he witnessed carved statues of buddhas, each detail etched with calculated precision. He marvelled at their beauty and occasionally visited the oasis to replenish his aching stomach.

The way back to civilization was tedious, and the boy almost got lost in the extensive desert. When the outer walls of the kingdom finally came to view, he bounded towards it and looked for the nearest marketplace. However, no one bought the scrolls he had found until an antique dealer spotted him. Motioning the boy inside a shop, he discreetly handed a few bags of yu fang coins for the books, nodding furiously while examining them. The boy didn't think much and was very pleased with his new found fortune, whistling away in joy.

He ended up living in Khotan for the rest of his life, never returning to the caves again though the stories he told of his experiences prompted others to travel there. The boy grew old watching young explorers go off and etch their own marks on the mountain walls. However, little did he know that the scrolls he found were a revolutionary discovery for Buddhist history, as they were sacred sutras and scriptures containing Buddha's teachings.

Despondent Soul

ESF King George V School, Shah, Dhairya – 14

The sky gradates to a warm orange as each minute passes, marking the dawn of the day. A sparse, yet pristine oasis of sand and hard rough rocks blankets the lands as far as one can see. Individual grains of sands shimmering in the sun's strong scarlet rays of light. Straight through the middle of the desert, a worn out path had been cut directly into the rough and uneven valley, like a scar on the back of a hand. This passage allowed for centuries trade and men to pass through the deserted landscape with ease from the Middle East to Asia. However, this route has been abandoned for a long time now.

Standing on the sun-beat hot rock of the barren wasteland, a small city was located far off in the distance. Plain and monochrome, Dun Huscang blending right into the desolate scenery, making it near impossible to notice. However, carved along the side of the valley about 25 kilometres away from the city, a series of isolated temples stood tall, while sticking out like a sore thumb next to the abandoned route. Tall acacia beams of wood sprouting from the ground to support the bracketed, dusty grey roof on each floor of the temples. Every floor of the temple reaching higher and higher until the tip of the building was scraping at noon sun. In the pit of the valley, below the temple, a group of tall green trees clustered around a clear water pond. The vibrant colours of nature contrasted with the dull environment surrounding them, instilling a peaceful sense of serenity. A group of camping tents were set up in the canyon below the temples.

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The unforgiving heat of the sun pounding against my back as I slowly climbed up the steep hill. With each step I took, a ripple of dust escaped from under my foot and out onto the musty ground of rock and gravel; it was clear this place had been unused for decades. I was at the base of the 'Library Caves' as the locals called it, after having hiked for several hours on end with my coworker. I reached out to the entrance of the building; the grand dark mahogany door dotted with golden studs shining in the light. Each and every small engraving and carving was finished with such precision and accuracy that it must have taken months, if not years, just to complete the door. I grip my hand around the handle of the majestic entrance and tug hard, only to find it locked shut to my dismay. "Kwan Sang! Get over here, I found the entrance!" I yelled out to my partner behind me. "Just a second Zhao."

My eyes scanned over the door, searching for any possible way to get into the grand temple. Even the hinges of the door, which were several decades old, hadn't even begun to rust; Every aspect of the entrance was crafted with such expertise and precision that it would be impossible to break into. Every possible security flaw had been taken into consideration and with no other method to enter the temple, my hopes started to die. My coworker walks over to me, eyes laser focused on the gateway looking just as dumbfounded as I was over this.

"I don't think we can possibly get in" I proclaim, walking dejectedly away from the door. My hands ran along the intricate details carved into the stone unconsciously. My attention snaps back to reality with the sound of a small click emitting from the cold stone wall next to my hand. I swivel on my legs turning to look at the entrance of the cave as a large wave of dust and debris rolls out and surrounds me.

My partner groans loudly in annoyance, but it's almost impossible to hear over the loud mechanical whirring of the door. In a hypnotical cyclic motion, the massive door folds into itself, opening to a dark and musty lobby.

I flick my flashlight on while taking a step forward into the ancient room with great care. Kwan follows my lead and we scan the room. The walls of the lobby were plastered with enormous bookshelves boasting hundreds or thousands of books and manuscripts. Gleaming artefacts and relics were littered on pillars around the room, each of them carefully positioned to create a spiral to the middle of the room. I reach my hand down instinctively to my long distance radio, but my partner notices and stops me before I can do anything.

"Don't dude, we can easily steal some of this crap and sell it for more on the black market. It's not like we get paid enough anyways."

I sigh as he unzips his backpack and begins to drop ancient artefacts of his liking into it one after another. Giving him twenty minutes before I call in to headquarters, I decide to walk forward into the temple. Each room after another I enter makes it seem more and more like a maze. I start running through the rooms, fantasizing the

amount of pay and how famous I would be for discovering an ancient temple like this leaves me ecstatic. Not focusing on the ground below me, I trip on a slab of cold stone. I wince as my face falls flat onto the grey stone brick.

Ignoring my aching foot, I slowly get up while examining the artwork engraved onto the hard stone. Twin dragons in a battle had been carefully engraved into the tile. The drawing was so detailed it seemed like it would just pop into life. The slab seemed to act like a trapdoor, attached with a handle to open it. I allowed my curiosity to get the best of me as I tugged on the trapdoor, leading to a massive dark cellar. A small thought appeared in my head "Your curiosity killed you", ignoring that I slowly climbed down the ladder each step dragging me deeper into ink black darkness.

I flicked on my flashlight, having finally reached the floor of the cellar. Even the light from such a powerful torch barely covered a slim fraction of the vast room.

"Waking me was a grave mistake." An eerily deep voice echoes in my head.

I snap my flashlight around the room, searching for the source of the sound but to no avail.

"Begone now, and we might let you live," again the voice speaks into my head.

"Who are you?!" I yell out, frightened and shivering with fear.

"You decide not to leave? So, you have chosen death." Paralyzed, I couldn't move my leg. My heart pounded against my chest as I slowly heard a massive object move. Several rocks fall to the ground from the direction of the monster rising. A plume of flame lashes out from the beast towards me, lighting up the room into deadly crimson. My eyes widen as time seems to slow down, the inferno slowly reaching out to devour me. I regain control and force myself out of the way at the last second. I cuss, realizing I was not fast enough leaving my ankle burnt and only one shoe remaining.

Rolling onto the ground next to me, I scream in pain and agony. My mind seemed to plunge into madness as the flickering dark and light molded into one. Torturing scourges of flames lash out again and again at my body, burning me to a crisp. The fear of death, of not wanting to leave this plain yet submerged me. I felt no more pain as I curled into a ball. A second later, all that remained was charred black bones lying on the cold hard stone floor.

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The flames residing near my mouth scald and boil away the water rolling down the dark blue scales of my eyelids. The loss of my lover pains me so much. The immortality that was a blessing to me only acts as a curse and the stupid human that woke me from my deep slumber infuriates me. I vow to myself to never allow anyone else to enter this room, ever to wake me from my sleep and cause me to remember what was. Using my powerful muscles in my arms and legs I tear down the supports of the chamber, the roof crashes and blocks any possible entrance to the basement. Being satisfied with my work after throwing a dozen or so more rocks towards the entrance, I settle myself into the floor of the cellar and allow my grief over being so desolate to slowly put me to sleep, a sleep I hope to never wake up from.

This Promise I Hold to My Grave

ESF King George V School, Zhao, Rou – 14

“I’ll tell the stars about you.” - B.K.

Winter, 1937

Dig your crystalline legs into my punctured veins. Trail your tapering fingers down my gushing, soaking veins. And come. Place that bloodstained palm of yours against the veil of my shuttered lids. They flutter. Once, twice.

Are you a thing?

Inhale,

exhale.

A something. A parasite that haunts the ridges and crevices within me, that even I have not explored? Or are you just this: A monster of memories. Burgundy wine I savour on my tongue, until you are bleeding, poisoning, blackening my blood. Till I am giddy and sweet with the mere taste of your nightmares and your dreams. The memories you send crashing wave after wave into my fevered brain.

And the dreams come like wildfire. A disaster born of cerulean lightning and smoking wood, that razes through all my defences until I am left gasping and short for air.

I see dunes. Sweeping whales of molten gold beads that plunge and rise, perhaps with the wardrum beat of footsteps that tread the barren land.

Wind, the hissing of sulphurous flames. Scorching, crackling, rubbing sand against sand until all the melody that is the air, rings with the death rattle of the desert.

The visions trickle, slowing. Stops.

Tap, tap.

It feels out its new conqueror, its foe. This nightmare, this memory, this secret of mine. It fingers the bumps and sloping grooves, the gyri, sulci of my brain.

Pushes.

And all of a sudden, I see stone. Gouges carved into cliffs, they would one day stroke the stippled sky.

I see vermillion, slate and the verdant green of forests that paint whorls and spirals, colours long faded into the sepia of photographs, yellow, bruising with age.

I am thrashing, writhing, squirming in my sleep, choked by blankets I hold with bunched fists and crescent-moon nails that tear and tear.

When I finally open my red-rimmed eyes, I can still taste the metallic bite of blood, welling in the back of my stone-cold throat.

* * *

“More of those dreams again?”

I stretch out my limbs as I contemplate the words, wrap my blanket tighter, tighter around my bony shoulders. “Last night, I saw something new for the first time,” I reply slowly. “For the past month, its all been the desert, you know? The dunes, the sand that goes on and on and never ends. The same dream, over and over again. I don’t mind it, but-”

I hesitate, and it is a question mark, a period, or perhaps an ellipsis that taunts and lingers.

My friend sighs. “You don’t get it? You want to know what’s going on?”

When I tilt my head in acknowledgement, her arms come to loop around me, and we are content to hold each other for a while.

“Well? What did you dream about then? Last night?”

“Caves.” I reply instantly. “Like a large ant’s nest, all peppered with these huge holes. It was all over the cliffs, and there were these beautiful paintings.”

The secrets I glimpsed night after night were as much a part of me now as all the uncharted stars to the moon. The stinging, salt-soaked wind to the brine of the sea. Clotting blood, lattice of veins, they spell out my breathless dreams.

The way the sun had hit the cliffs at just the right angle to spill the amber lustre of sweet light. The way everything soon became drenched and coated, bathed within the colour of freshest autumn leaves.

It was as if everything had been spun from spools of thread stolen from the finest wisps of clouds that had once adorned sunsets. Threads of marigold petals strung in silken garlands. Of freshly spilt honey, sticky and wild which twisted, wove and embroidered all that touched the wandering eye. “But it was so pretty, August.” I chew on the inside of my cheeks. “You don’t understand.”

My friend inclined her head towards me, and when she spoke her eyes are latched upon mine. “And what did you say the dreams were like? The thing that gave you those dreams?”

Like spirits. Like ghosts, monsters. It had a physical presence, pressed tight against my waxen flesh. Barely sealed within me, threatening to erupt, reach arms strung with intestines, claw itself out my gaping mouth.

Like something hid within me, stole every *pump pump* of my telltale heart, snatched at every thought, every colour that shot, electrical, tingling through my splintering, fracturing skull.

And every night, the *thing* feeds me. Stuff rotting roses of desert-world dreams into my restless sleep, until I am eroded, whittled down, all strung together, rickety. Me with my sack of sagging skin and bones, I dance on its gilded strings.

I smile. "It's nothing, really. Just a headache, now and then."

Her eyes are searching, seeking, are they pleading? I've played this game for far too long. In the end, all that August can do is give the sad little laugh of a friend who had long learned you. All about you. Your machinery, every oiled cog and gear twisting, turning, what makes you *tick tick tick*. Who had long learned to strip through every little lie you wove, deft cut by cut. And who gripped my hand now because we both knew of the sleepless, spinning nights. The smoke-throttled dreams, restless murmurings, they wrack my sweat-drenched body.

All of this, I hide.

* * *

The next time I see August, there is almost nothing left of me. Hands locked around my chest. They squeeze and squeeze as if I could push it down. Just push it down, restrain this monstrous thing that feasts inside of me.

Is it my heart that's beating? Is it me that closes my tired eyes now?

You or

me?

It has grown persistent. Gnawing from inside this home it has made, coiled and meshed between my blood-soaked organs. It rears and shakes, sends wave after wave of dreams.

They come prowling deep in the middle of the night, bullet after bullet, you strike my weathered flesh. You fog up my vision until my eyes are watering, and my heavy breaths escape my pursed lips in ragged, choking hiccups, scraped out from somewhere within my clogged up, smoke-filled lungs.

Over and over again, the visions whirl through my head.

August rushes for me, cradles me against her. "Hey, hey. Are you okay? Juliette, hey!" Her fingers knot through my sopping, tangled hair. "I'm here, I'm here, okay? Hey, hey, it's okay. Is it your dreams? The beast?"

My fingers form claws around her wrists, and I clench them. She winces. Doesn't draw away.

I hold her, she holds me. She is real, real, real.

Fake.

Fake?

Real. August is real. She's here. I'm here.

I listen as she begins to speak. Regain myself with every lilting note her petal-soft voice forms. She strokes my feverish head, speaks in undulating streams as if her words can patch these oozing, hidden blisters that paint me inside and out.

"Do you want to know something that might cheer you up? Yeah? Yeah? Okay." She croons to me, stitches her words like a lullaby. "Well, I did some research after you told me about your visions, and I found your dreams in the newspapers. Do you know it? They're called the Mogao Grottoes." She wipes my blood-stained lips. "The Mogao caves if you will, and it's surrounded by miles upon miles of desert."

Inhale, exhale. The beast loosens its chokehold on me.

"Some people are calling it the land of dreams. It was discovered a few years ago." She smooths my jagged fingers until they are limp. Laces her own ones through mine. "But a lot of the caves have been vandalised, damaged, things stolen from them." She falters. The beast falters.

Her eyes are the softest of blacks when she entangles them with mine. "I think you should go, Juliette." It's there, snarled within the tug of her lips, drowned within the sugar of hope. "Maybe it's the source of your monster. Maybe all of your visions and nightmares."

What a dangerous thing it is, hope. "Maybe." I fight to regain my voice. "Maybe it'll make it all go away." For once I allow myself to dream. "Maybe I'll get better."

She rests her cold, cold forehead against mine.

When I speak again, there is only me. Just me, lying here, monster be damned. "I won't be gone for long."

She bites her lips. "Promise?"

I smile. "I promise."

* * *

Spring, 1937

Cloaked within these angel wings of night, we travel. Your haunting voice is the chorus of asteroids. Of incandescent meteorites and comets swirled within the frosted haze of galaxies, nebulae, stars. You sing, and you are the phantasmal caress of gold-veined ivies that engulf, play tic-tac-toe across my stone foundation.

You are everything gone rotten in this world. You are a beast shrouded in beauty, and you are a festering, oozing wound that can only cause pain, pain, pain.

Yet still, I follow you.

My stumbling legs walk this path you trace for me. Follow you as your voice rises into a *crescendo*.

The world is my compass, and you are pulling me, tugging me, onwards due north.

Are you still my parasite? My infection, my monster, my secret?

But as we pass through sleepy villages, twining wires strung with homespun garments. As we trek across unbroken, windswept mountains of sand painted sanguine by the glow of the setting sun, you have been my only companion. And as we finally breach the line of the known and the unknown, I step willingly into the oblivion of my most insidious dreams, the figments of my broken, fractured imaginations.

I feel nothing from you now, my night-horror. Nothing except for thirst, and wanderlust.

Nothing but a bone-deep tug of longing.

Is this your home?

My footsteps echo. They patter, fall, fold against the rough-hewn stone, like raindrops disintegrating into soil. If I strain, quiver my nostrils, it's almost as if I can smell it, air redolent of sweet petrichor.

But there isn't, I can't.

I march blindly into the unfathomable bellies of these ancient, mammoth caves. It's too dark for my naked eyes, but not for yours.

I heed your call, follow your steadfast lead. And like this, you guide me, nuzzle me. You nudge me gently, so gently.

Labyrinths and labyrinths, I leave my mark upon the dusty ground.

Is this what you wanted all along?

You were never born of rage, were you? My monster, my sweet, you couldn't help it. *Hiraeth*: a homesickness for a home you can't return to.

But you're home now. You are placated. Content. You sit me down, and we wait.

For what, I do not know, but I place my life within those bloodstained palms of yours that I used to fear.

* * *

Mirrors. Spreading, fracturing gossamer strands of silk cobweb light. They split in all directions. Upside down, wrong way around. You turn, turn, turn the wheel of this sinking ship.

And so, like a mirror, I fall asleep and wake up to dreams.

Where have you brought me?

I am soaked in colour. The world unravels, spools of thread around me, and I see porcelain, begonia, and seafoam. Orchid, lilac, deep lavender. Sapphire and steel, conflated into swirls of a watercolour painting.

Murals cram every last inch of bare rock, and it is as if I could glide here, perhaps I could fly. Stretch out my arms and touch worlds with both outstretched hands.

Galaxies filled with fairies and bodhisattvas and buddhas, they are all within my reach.

There is history spidering, leaving ripples, conchoidal fractures in every painstaking piece of chipped stone and sunburnt paint in this cavern you brought me to.

But you ask me to run, and if I did, rose petal smooth skin crumpling, creasing, weathering within the space of a prolonged sigh, I would finally understand. I would see the garish blood-red of graffiti lacerated, scratched across your tumbledown home.

I would see men and women dressed in midnight. They steal handfuls of bygone times, pocketful by pocketful, till one day, there will be nothing left of these ribbed walls you used to dance within.

Everything that serenades you and your brethren. Everything that breathed of your past and present and future. Sepulchral banners, statues, timeworn scrolls, they will melt into greedy hands.

And is this why you've brought me here?

Who are you, my dearest of nightmares, what do you wish me to do?

Are you a phantom? Monster? Guardian, knight of these palatial caves you call your home?

The ocean's smooth glass, gentles them. The incessant *drip drip* of fitful rain can leave its mark upon even the most stubborn of cliffs. And so, time will do the same. Time will coax spring shoots from arid grounds. Time

will wrap plaster after plaster across all of our gashes and wounds. Time will heal this ruined species of us. Even I couldn't see the good that you were, until it was far too late. Until I was already drowning, and only then did I plead and call. Only then did I come running, flailing for you.

Decades, centuries, however long it will take, life will never stop its ceaseless pendulum sway.

When the next fortunate person arrives, they will dig past choking sand and rock. They will find this. These caves that encompass time and space, that loops with the deftness of arteries across cliffs and desert land. They will treasure this. They will collect fragments, and rebuild these walls, these interwoven stories of yesteryear, of your ancient times, of history.

So, I will bleed for you. I will reach my hand into every fissure. Every piece of stardust, ripped tissue, beating organ of mine, until I am laid bare, stretched inside out beneath the infinite night sky of your gaze.

Take me, consume me, head over heels, I tumble. Do what you must do. I'll sink into your arms; let you count my dying breath. *Thump thump* of my heart as it strangles in this chokehold, this bruising force I hold against myself. And in the end, all that I am.

All that is left of me is a dreamer, entrusted with this promise I hold to my grave.

I release a vacant sigh, and around me, the walls begin to crumble.

We sink. We fall.

We are forgotten.

The Unforgotten Grotto

ESF South Island School, Rocabosh, Calista – 15

Pain seared through her head as she peeled her eyes open, light peered through the entrance on the far side of the spacious cavern. She rubbed her forehead with a sand covered hand, trying to push the aching feeling away while she took in her surroundings. A faint noise came from behind her, startling her to her feet. She whipped her head around just to hit her nose on a pile of high stacked paintings. She peeked around the pile to see a wide-eyed monk, staring at her, holding some artifacts in his clenched hand. He was standing in front of a hole in the sandstone wall, and behind that... groups of people walked among each other, creating, painting and writing. The pain had subsided and she began to remember where exactly she was...

The Mogao caves, a masterpiece in the eyes of an artist, a masterpiece in the eyes of anyone. Studying art was always Wei Lin's dream, and this, this wondrous place, would be as close as she'd get. It's hard to become an artist as a woman in the 20th century, so when Wei Lin heard about this trip from her local college, she jumped at the chance to see the caves.

She reached to touch her hand along the rough stone, trying to make sense of the etched lines that were engraved into the cliff side. Excavated into a mile of cliff face outside Dunhuang, an oasis town at the edge of the Gobi desert over half a millenia ago this path was brimming with travelling traders. Travelling across the Silk Road in China, a monk saw this cliff face as something more. He envisioned a thousand radiant buddhas and thus the name "Valley of a thousand buddhas" was born.

The cliff face was adorned with towering buddha sculptures, carvings in the sandstone walls and grooves on the rough floor. All of this was hand carved out of the alluvial conglomerate rock. Wei Lin had asked how it was possible it had survived so long, forgotten and yet still not deteriorating, how all of the relics had still survived despite their great age. The remote location of the caverns helped it survive, along with the dry desert climate that Wei Lin could feel throughout her whole body. She pulled at her white blouse and wiped the sweat off her forehead. Tying up her long black hair with a piece of leather, she traipsed toward the cave's entrance.

Sand fell from the high ceilings as Wei Lin went through the two pillars that acted as an entrance to the caves. She made sure to show the wristband she was given to make it clear she was permitted in the area as a scholar explorer, as a courtesy of Wang Yuanlu. The guardian of these majestic grottoes. Wang Yuanlu was revered by the people coming to explore the caves, he had taken it upon himself to restore the caves to its former fame. As well as this, he had taken it upon himself to share the history of these caverns with the world, make all the stories known. She was nearly skipping with excitement as she thought about the things she might come across exploring.

They were given free reign over the exploration of the caves but the bidding was only held for museum ambassadors and expedition leaders who wanted to acquire the historic relics. However, Wei Lin had talked to some of them before this trip and many of them were wary about how much they would actually be able to get and were fully prepared to bid as high as possible. They were wholly aware that there must be over tens of thousands of scriptures, art and artifacts lying in the depths of the grottoes but what Wang Yuanlu wanted to give out, was very limited. The negotiations were also going to take place, many wanted to see if they could receive more knowledge on the caves by debating the terms of how much would be donated to museums and how much would stay in its place, where it has lied for centuries and surely more centuries to come.

A beautiful painting was hung on a flat wall in the corner of a narrow hall crowded with entrances to various caves filled to the brim with information. Wei Lin recognised the painting as a Xixia style piece. The painting however was incredibly damaged, the ends were wilted and rolled into the wall which allowed Wei Lin to see a tiny crack

pouring out light onto the dim corridor floors. She placed her eye near the hole and peeked through. What she saw astonished her. There were towering piles of scriptures and paintings. Manuscripts lay on the floor, undisturbed by the sand particles that whisked them to and fro. The cavern was spacious, the ceiling as tall as the buddha she had seen outside, it was over thirty metres tall. Would it be possible to get in? She thought to herself, doubting anyone could have missed such a large treasure trove such as this one.

But maybe they didn't miss it, it was possible they holed up the cave so no one could get to it. This triggered a memory in Wei Lin's brain. When she was researching in preparation for this trip she had heard about a library cave that had been made into a storeroom for sutra scrolls, documents and paintings but it had been sealed in in the beginning of the eleventh century when the site was in danger of getting attacked by a neighbouring country. The entrance was boarded up and its existence was further concealed by wall paintings in the corridor outside the treasure trove. Which must mean...

Wei Lin peeled her face from the stone wall and pulled at the painting, sure enough, it came off. Though Wei Lin didn't expect it to be so easy and she fell to the hard ground with the painting in her clenched hands. She spit out the sand that had flown into her mouth, still grasping onto the Xixia painting. Looking at the entrance to what apparently was said to be the treasure trove of the Mogao grottoes, she contemplated the events that had just happened.

She had found a hidden cave, one that was hidden behind the wall no less and now was about to walk right in. She stood up to brush off the dirt that had jumped onto her flowing black skirt and quietly approached the cave entrance. As she entered the cavern, her gaze flitted toward a painting on top of one of the many piles. She tentatively picked it up, making sure not to put too much pressure on it as it must have been thousands of years old and for all she knew, putting too much pressure on it could make it crumble to dust. It depicted a traveling monk wearing sandals and some sort of contraption that looked like a bag on his back. A Buddha was painted in a meditative pose on the top left, showing that this was in fact a buddhist piece. Many of the manuscripts weren't Buddhist however, some were Christian, Confucian and even Daiost texts, the languages varied from Chinese and Tibetan to Sanskrit and Old Turkish. All of these cultures and religions had once lived and thrived in harmony in these caves, and now, there were only manuscripts to prove it. It's amazing how, if none of these manuscripts or paintings existed, all the history and stories that were created here would be... gone. History could be washed away so easily, and no one would even realise it.

Who really knows what happened in any of these ancient times, people could have interpreted things wrong, read things wrong. But it's much easier to just believe it, Wei Lin thought, it's much easier to just go along with things and not try to understand or learn. Wei Lin gently placed the painting back on the pile and started to walk towards the entrance, not feeling like she was supposed to be here when she heard quiet scuffling behind her. She spun around, finding a wide eyed monk standing a few metres away from her. Then, something hard hit the back of her head, and the darkness seeped in.

She rubbed at her aching head, willing the pain to retreat, to go back to the place from which it came. Her mind was hurting, her thoughts jumbled as she stared at the hidden city before her. The walls of the caves keeping them in, protecting them as they shuffle and run around going about their daily lives. The floors were made of rocks and stone creating winding paths leading to places that Wei Lin could only guess about. There were stands for painting, children running around playing with their friends, and in the middle of it all... a single scroll, placed in a sealed glass box. It glittered in the lantern light, untouched by human hands for so many years, there was not a single smudge or crack in the box.

In the Library Cave there were things placed there that dated after the eleventh century, when people assumed it had been holed up to make sure the information was safe. Now, Wei Lin could see why some of the dates were passed

the eleventh century; the Buddhist practices that were common in the 13th century had been among the scriptures in the caves. People had tried to rationalise and push away the questions of what timeline did it fit? But Wei Lin could see now, more clearly than ever, that they were missing a big piece of the puzzle. These caves.

She was so in awe of the designs, the pillars grew from the floor to the ceiling, spirals of engraved stone weaving its way across the circular surfaces, the lanterns hung from the cave ceilings and were placed in small nooks in the wall. The lantern's orange light was iridescent against the conglomerate rock walls, spreading like a bright tidal wave across the cobblestone floors, illuminating the grottoes in a warm and comforting embrace of luminescence.

When the expedition leaders had talked about a forgotten portal to the past, they had barely scratched the surface. This was the real hidden world behind the grottoes, creating and writing literature and art in seclusion, sealed away and concealed from the world's prying eyes.

History could easily be rewritten or washed away, but here... here, history was being made. They might not know it yet, because who really knows when history is being created, you only know it when you reach the finish line that there was ever even a story to tell.

She was enraptured in the majesty of the caverns so much so that she had barely heard the monk from before come up to her. He wore long, wide cross collared robes, his hair was short cropped ebony and he wore a simple pendant necklace that showed a dharma wheel, representing mindfulness and moral discipline.

"Welcome, to the Library caves," The monk said solemnly, "My name is Wang Yuanlu, the guardian of the grottoes."

"I- Yes... Hello, my name is Wei Lin, I'm one of the scholars that came here to explore and gain knowledge on these grottoes. Albeit, in all my research I have never heard of these caves being a part of it." Wei Lin explained

"That is because no one has, we live in secret, designing and building. A prime example of this would be the Diamond Sutra," He pointed towards the scroll in the secure box that Wei Lin had previously admired.

"It is well known across the globe for being the oldest dated, printed book in the world. Many attempts were made to steal or acquire this ancient artifact so it had to be moved here."

"How is it possible that all of this has been kept secret, with all of the expeditions?" Wei Lin asked.

"As a guardian of the caves, I have been handed a trust to keep this community safe and secret with my life, many have seen the library cave that is displayed in front however, their exploration is incredibly limited as I am always there to make sure they can only see a few parts of the cave," Wang Yuanlu explained, "But seeing as you have already found us here, I would like to show you around. But, as I have guarded this secret with my life, I can only beg of you to do the same"

"Of course, I will keep this my most closely guarded secret." Wei lin said, excited to unravel this wondrous part of the world that had only been shown to a mere few.

If history was conveyed just through memory then Wei Lin made sure to soak everything up, lock it into her brain and memorise it. Many parts of history aren't seen, but many parts that are seen are twisted, tainted into lies written by people who were biased. Wei Lin supposed that she wouldn't ever know for sure if the historical books she read were true because she wasn't there. Some people believe that they will go down in history as a hero, but let the wrong person tell the story, and you might not even be in history at all.

Enlightenment

ESF West Island School, Tsang, Eric – 14

Rebirth.

Harmonious, sonorous thoughts echo through the chambers of the clay halls, complementing the immense silence that pervades the static air. As the rest of my limbs stir into an unmoving consciousness of the caressing hands, I feel the light strokes of bristles moisten my eyelids, and I observe the demure smile of satisfaction unfurling on the young monk in front of me, which hastily dissolves into a solemn look of appreciation as he effortlessly suppresses his fleeting swell of pride. Briefly, his subdued eyes flicker with effulgence, meeting my gaze, ever warm, ever serene, ever sunny. Acknowledging my existence, he remembers his purpose and quietly slips away, his fingertips last to leave the touch of my palm. ‘Thank you,’ I thought, the undulating whisper of gratitude rippling from the core of my heart, glowing a sharp, hidden shade of red, extending to the end of my palm... But the wave never came into contact with him, nor did it manage to flutter away and escape from my stonelike, earthen body.

Sat firmly cross-legged, eyes closed in a meditative pose, with my right palm held facing forwards, I am unable to see or move, and a few loose rocks gather in the alcove I am placed in, causing slight discomfort. I simply rest above these superficial fragments of the mind, my steadfast demeanour as placid, as contemplative as ever - I have overcome suffering long ago, and I am free of desire, or the need to move or see... In an instant, Buddhas see all, Buddhas know all.

It was in that timeless moment that I gathered I was a reincarnation of Buddha, part of a realisation of the vision seen by Le Zun the Buddhist monk. A thousand Buddhas had appeared before him here in the desert, bathed in golden light. But why? Why did that vision occur to him? It couldn't have been a figment of his starved mind, imagination... So what purpose do I have here? Did I not resolve all of my karma in the previous life, liberating myself from its perpetuation? Why have I been reintroduced to the cycle of rebirth? The illustrious spirit of the Buddha is eternal. I am eternal.

My hair is tied into a bun. Draped over my shoulder is a piece of clay fabric, laced with jewels, extending to cover my whole body. Intricate, cloud-like swirls are emblazoned into it, resembling the sinuous streams and serpentine winds. The luxurious alcove behind me is lined with gold-plated tiles, a mosaic of rich, vibrant sheaves of wheat that join at the top, with a plethora of clay ribbons surrounding me that twirl away into the walls. Dense geometric structures of gems weave the upper part of the corridors, twining and spiralling up into the domed roof of the imposing apse. Candles placed carefully by the walls cast a soft, golden hue onto the Buddhas, dyeing the room an ever-changing tint of orange, just the way Le Zun had envisioned it. Meticulous, dynamic paintings of Buddhist figures fill the remaining part of the walls, each one uniquely identified, possessing a crystalline quality, depicting the transformation of the mind as enlightenment approaches.

Sat in a semicircle beside me are other Buddhas, some female, some male, dressed differently, with the same alcoves but different resting positions, more subtle, less dramatic, but just as luxuriously placed nonetheless. We must be extremely revered to be enshrined, elevated like this. I paused for a moment, wondering if the fellow Buddhas beside me were wondering about the same things as I was. I willed myself to elicit a response from them, willed them to respond, however their emotions were just as locked behind the facade of their indifference as mine were. For a moment, I thought I saw the stormy seas of the mind through the empty stare of the Buddha far opposite me, then realised that it was merely a mirage I had constructed of the torch fire reflected in its eyes. We remained just as unwaveringly composed, just as pacific, our everlasting, serene smiles and sunny eyes revealing everything and nothing about us at the same time.

Our faces answer all questions. Our thoughts punctuate them.

The pilgrims and monks below us are just as composed as us, eyes closed, mouths drawn, sitting or kneeling, hands rested on their laps or held in a fist in front of their chests. Their thoughts are ablaze, however, allowed to run freely in the caves. Perhaps this is an indication of their restlessness, that they are yet to achieve nirvana... A sea of thoughts emanate from these people, flowing rhythmically to surround us, conducted brilliantly by their collective mindfulness. Boundless, righteous thoughts freed from ill-will, liberated from sensual desire. What a shame these pilgrims and monks are currently unable to gain insight into this strangely comforting, ethereal music! Yet why does this feel so comforting, to be in the presence of imperfect beings? They idolise us, we are their objects of worship.

One of the aspiring Buddhists before me, a young boy trying to let go of his angst, finishes his meditation practice, and lifts his gaze to meet mine. Immediately I sense something disappear, and a tiny bit of the shimmering lustre that enveloped the room drifts back to him. A cold glint of disappointment and chagrin settles in his pallid eyes; he shrugs his shoulders and channels it away.

‘I felt nothing...’ he thinks, holding back his bluster with a contemptuous tranquillity.

‘That is exactly what you should be feeling...!’ I thought, glaring back at him with as much vigour as I could muster, the sheer frustration of helplessness tugging at my leaden face. Somehow, the message seemed to register, and a soft fulfilment finds and imparts itself to him as he walks off.

‘Please guide me to Buddhaship,’ another one silently wishes, aiming her infinite, intent stare fixedly at me, sending an unexpected chill into my stony, hardened heart as I contained a rueful laugh, knowing that my impenetrable facade would fall before fiery eyes could melt an inch into my icy walls.

‘I wish I could...’ I thought, ‘But you’ll have to guide yourself.’

‘Perhaps Buddhaship isn’t at all what I believe it is,’ she thinks. ‘Is this a doubt that I have in Buddhist teachings...?’ Brooding, discordant thoughts appear, visibly staining the pleasant, melodious atmosphere. Tucking herself back into a cross-legged position, she turns her elbows upright, cups both her cheeks with her palms and rests her sagging chin on them, her lower jaw hanging slightly open, pensive but hopeful.

She looks around and redirects her concentration at me, checking to see if her thoughts had any impact on my expression. Relieved, she continues meditating.

Buddhas see all, she wordlessly chants with fervour, Buddhas know all.

And with that, she melts back into the orchestra of subtly unspoken prayers.

‘But Buddhas don’t feel all...’ I thought to myself. ‘They merely fade into nothingness.’ I start to notice the imperfections in the room, stark and distinct as they cast a striking contrast to the perfect chorus of thoughts. A blemish on the porcelain vase beside me, a crack in the clay walls, the last unfinished paintbrush stroke and slight fracture by my elbow. Unperturbed, I conclude that these mistakes were made by humans. Humans, who have not transcended time and space. Humans, who have not achieved nirvana, and are still prone to distractions and errors.

Observing the serenity of the room, I realise I am not needed. Slipping out of the cage I am put in, I let my mind adopt a state of formlessness, reassured our followers have everything they need. Devout pilgrims and monks arrive and go. They blur into nothingness as I fade away from the realm of perception.

Awakening.

Time presents itself to me when I return; I am not interested. Nothing has changed in me. I remain just as rock-solid, just as sturdy, my smile and gaze just as revealing and unrevealing as before. The glorious music and visible tranquillity that I experienced before still reign in this cave, and this cave is still just as popular with our fellow Buddhists, however there exists an evident lack of hustle and bustle that intrigues me. The music I heard before is now of a different calibre and tune - still as harmonious as before, but no longer as rich, no longer as vibrant and bright, and more of a subdued quality, as if they were naive children who matured to be more accepting of the inherent suffering of life.

I spot the woman from before, wan and faltering, peering in from around the entrance, an aura of emptiness surrounding her. She stares into my eyes again, a sharp, piercing, sweeping, expectant stare. And surprisingly this time I find myself being the one who tries to gain insight into her. I bore through her inky, swirling marble eyes and tried to navigate through her pitch-darkness, but there the entrance was locked tight, and I could not wander any further into the garden of her heart. No indicator, no key I could use to peer into the depths of her being. Her cold, ebony eyes would forever be shut away from the world. Only the facade of her withered self could be observed. She had attained nirvana, I realised. The gain in the strength of her mind had come at the cost of her emaciated body. One more ascended spirit soon liberated from death... and life, I thought wistfully.

Absorbed in my own thoughts, the harsh cavity of inaudibility amid the peaceful harmony recedes, swallowed. When I bring myself back to my senses, she is no longer there, yet I know she always will be. Even as my right arm remains outstretched forwards, with my palm pointed firmly towards the sky, I heave a sigh of weariness.

A jewel tumbles from my clothes, dislodging a small chunk of my thigh before falling to the ground with a distinct clatter that reverberates across the room. And although a few of my followers soon come to my aid and fix it back in its position, I am left to question my timelessness.

I never see her again. As the days come and go, more and more of my aspiring Buddhists turn out like her - they achieve the highest levels of concentration, freeing themselves of anything the mind can conjure, thus achieving nirvana. One by one, the thought musicians bow out, stars who shine with rising vivacity and splendour until they vanish, halting in an abrupt finale, never to be heard again.

In the languid silence, I reflect on how the boy felt before he left, instilling a thought that nags me - is Nirvana really what we are after? At the highest levels of concentration, we can peer into the thoughts of others while attaining utmost control over ours... we rid ourselves of the desire to feel. I recall the cold, stony glare of the woman, the metamorphosis that she underwent in the path to enlightenment. By freeing ourselves of dissolution, are we essentially robbing ourselves of the capacity to feel? Are we robbing ourselves of warmth?

I observe the Buddhas sitting beside me, a semicircle of stillness, an ironic sangfroid that reflects nothing of the turmoil caused by the violent tempest in my stone-cold heart.

I wonder if I still retain the purity that I possessed.

The fire in the torches snuff out with no one to maintain them, and eventually just a pure darkness reigns, accompanying the tremendous silence that pervades the static air of the caves. Perhaps this is the true meaning of timelessness - to have every moment of time with you when it has no meaning - time has no effect on the quiescence and constancy of these picturesque caves. Time presents itself to me; I listen, for it is my only companion.

Humans aren't eternal, I remind myself.

These caves are eternal. I am eternal.

And with that, light engulfs the ashen room.

Not the natural, flickering flame of the torches, but rather a harsher, constant, stark white glow.

There are men. They are not here to practise Buddhism. They speak a foreign language.

A brew of their desire and wonder congeals to smother the clay halls.

'Look at what waits for us here,' one of them says, tantalised.

'I can't wait to bag these riches,' another one says, a look of treacherous lust in his malicious eyes.

I shut myself from these abominable horrors.

They walk towards me.

They put their hands on me.

They climb upon me.

They sit on my lap.

They point something at us, a camera, I gather from their thoughts. A contraption that captures time itself. They smile, a cloying smile, directing a bright flash of light at us, and I feel a tiny portion of myself being drawn out into the camera.

They disappear, leaving nothing but darkness behind, yet I know they will soon return to satisfy the rest of their desires.

Tired of my inability to react, and uninterested in the ill intentions of these men, I remain aloof and let myself be at peace, undisturbed.

Incessant chatter and vague discussion fill the room, buzzing with eager anticipation, a knotted, ravelled mess of audible dissonance impossible to untangle. I can make out the disparate voices, however I am familiar with none, and cannot

identify the voices from the rapturous cacophony of sounds. A crowd of people are gathered in an orderly fashion at the entrance, drowned in jarring jets of brilliant, potent light. The jewels on the cloth draped over my shoulder have been replaced with newer ones, I notice. The robbers before must have stolen them. My knee has healed. The portion of the garment on my lap has been replaced as well. And the paintings on the walls have been redrawn.

A small boy is let in and excitedly approaches me with curious fascination. Tiptoeing gently, eyes open wide, he stands a metre in front of me and bends his head back upwards so that he can take in my full figure and height. 'Wow...' He thinks. I'm flattered. Walking over to my feet, he hugs me with ardent zest.

'Aww...' his parents say with an emphatic wholeheartedness. They take a device out of their coat sleeves and direct it at my naked self. Stinging rays of white stab into my raw body, a thousand blinding needles trying to penetrate into my core. Reflexively, I direct a pulse of energy into my arm in an attempt to shield the boy before noticing that the boy seems to be immune to the lights. My outstretched palm forms a perfect barrier between the lights and my face, but that doesn't stop a dozen streams of myself from flowing into their cameras.

My right arm shivers momentarily from the quake, a shudder that happens just as the boy jumps to throw his leg over my thigh, and I suddenly become aware of a fatigue, a palpable lack of strength that I am certain wasn't there before. Hanging from his leg, the boy curls his lip in determination, tenses before he arches his back, lurches around his waist and pulls himself up with a swift jolt. Grasping at my left elbow with a powerful leap, he secures himself by hooking his wrists behind and lacing his fingers together. He performs a graceful acrobatic swing and deftly flips himself onto my lap.

It takes a couple of moments for his parents to stop cheering. Their jaws slowly drop in a fit of apoplexy, arousing animated, transient mirth.

Thrusting himself up, he reaches for my shoulder and climbs up. Now we are level. He heaves a sigh of relief and closes his eyes, sitting down and wrapping his legs around my arm. We observe a sense of togetherness as he opens his eyes to meet my gaze.

I am touched.

All around us, there is commotion and mayhem, an utter barrage of noise. Pandemonium reigns around us, but I am convinced it won't puncture our safe bubble of sweetness and soundness. The boy is just as calm as I am, reassuring me.

'Let me see you whole...' he thinks, and there is nothing I can do as he begins to shuffle backwards to my palm. Already I feel him sliding out of the reach of our safe bubble, and my arm emits an unsettling creak. It weakens steadily, significantly, something that would be an impossibility if my strength hadn't been sapped to a crisp by these cameras. I shake wildly, trembling, unable to gather the concentration I need to isolate my mind and body from this chaos. An intense blow of shock finally cracks my face open as a silent cry emerges from my heart, sending billows of exhausting emotion rippling away into my arm, down through my palms into my fingertips and into the boy, but it never reached them, for down on the ground, tainted amid havoc and confusion, lies my arm and the boy, clung to each other, shattered, inseparable.

My contorted eyes skit over a floating canvas, tracing a frenzied flurry of images on the overpowering white, my mind a glittering, dynamic, ethereal palette. My dazzled eyes clouding with whirling haze, I lose the canvas in the vortex of white and soon every bit of colour washes away, leaving it blank.

Enlightenment.

It is only when the last of me is drawn out into the unrelenting cameras that I realise my end was never near.

My clay body and the cameras, I realise, have granted me a separate identity as a timeless spirit.

I am everywhere, but not a Buddha. My gentle, reserved smile manifests into a wide grin. Emotion floods back to me. Buddhism, attaining Nirvana and enlightenment, is a pathway from life out of suffering, liberating us from... Life. Life inherently makes us suffer, makes us cold, hardened, stony. The path of Buddhism merely enlightens us.

Eternally.

Brewing the Avarice, Swallowing the Product

Evangel College, Koo, Hoi Ching – 16

On a crisp autumn night, two archeologists, David and William, ventured into a caliginous cave. Gripping their torches tightly, two shafts of light illuminated the cave and that was when the two men started their excavation of treasures and antiques.

‘Wow, the sculptures and paintings here are marvelous.’ hissed David incredulously, casting the light onto a sculpture of a man which was partly battered, yet its wide-opened eyes were clearly revealed, and were etched with a sense of consternation.

‘Yes, they are so realistic.....’ said William, his voice tapering off.

‘Any astounding treasures?’ asked David bracingly.

‘Look.’ said William, grabbing a piece of yellowish parchment, which was smeared with soil and dirt.

David trotted towards William, tilting his head to examine the parchment in his hand carefully. Despite the fact that the words written on it were densely packed, they were intelligible.

To humans who discovered this cave :

You must be feeling perplexed towards the objects in Mogao Grottoes. If my postulation isn't wrong, everything here is nothing more than stationary, non-sentient objects. I should have already passed away for a long time by the time you read this. However, the relics here remain, and the change humans wrought long ago to this world cannot be erased.

Long time ago, I went on an excursion with a few confidants of mine. We trekked through mountains surrounded by cascades, and forests with towering trees. One sweltering afternoon, when we reposed ourselves in a cave, I caught a glimpse of a blaze of light shooting across the cave.

‘What's that?’ said one of my confidants, whirling his head around.

Intrigued, I tiptoed towards the darkness inside the cave. The sound of dripping water resonated across the cavern. The ghastly atmosphere which suffused in the pitch-black environment made my blood run cold.

‘Woosh....’

A zephyr crept over my body, inducing me to quiver unconsciously. I stood still and took a deep breath. Suddenly, something stirred before my eyes. I couldn't tell if it was glittering, but I was certain that there were furtive activities of something unknown. Mustering my courage, I strode across the damp floor and approached the mystical source. Gradually, the movements appeared to be more conspicuous under my sight.

Embedded against the rocky surface of the wall was a rectangular painting. Appearing inside the frame was a crimson creature with a pair of prominent eyes and a humongous head. The pigment used to fill the background was all in gold.

Instantly, the pair of bulging eyes disappeared under the crimson eyelids. They were revealed again after a moment.

My stomach plummeted and my heart missed a beat. It was already peculiar enough to see an abnormal creature on a painting. It was even more preternatural to have a sight of objects moving and blinking in it. The moment I decided to run for my life, there was something jutting out from the painting. My jaw went slack and I exclaimed from the bottom of my heart.

Very soon, there were more unusual things swirling outside the frame and protuberating out of it. I squeezed my eyes shut, whacking my head frantically and hoping to wake up from this nightmare.

'What are you doing?' a voice echoed through the cave hoarsely.

I gradually opened my eyes. The crimson creature with over-sized eyes and a plurality of flexible legs emerged before me. Being petrified, I gasped again, pressing my hand against my mouth.

'Don't be scared. I am just a creature from another planet.' assured the creature, brandishing its long hands.

'What is.... a planet?' stuttered I, 'and why are you coming out from a painting?'

'The universe is a whole, of course I can come to you through this portal. And my name is Zizy,' said the creature.

I opened my mouth, but no words came out. My heart was filled with nothing more than bewilderment.

'Oh yes, don't be too flustered.' said Zizy. 'It might be the first time you're witnessing this, as there is only one place on a planet which can have access to another planet. I mean, another living environment.'

'So.....what's behind that painting?', asked I, pointing towards the frame with quaking fingers.

'Follow me,' said Zizy, beckoning me. 'I will explain everything to you, human.'

Dubiously, I took a step out and walked towards the painting. Zizy proffered his moistened hand to me, and I clutched it with uncertainty. Before being fully aware of what was happening, a force pulled my arm forward vigorously and a chilly sensation overtook my body.

'Ouch,' hissed I, at the moment my face hit onto a hard surface. Once I jerked my head up, an inconceivable scenario emerged before my eyes. Located right next to me was a plunge pool enriched with golden liquid. There were fluorescent fumes and bubbles glistening above the fluid, reflecting multiple colors to the surroundings. The clouds in the sky were tinged with mild yellow and they almost blended with the orange pigment of the sky. Even for the grassy floor, it glimmered with dazzling amber.

That was the most breathtaking and bizarre place I'd ever seen. Flabbergasted, I inhaled deeply. The smell of this place was unique, as if I was at an ore yard. I couldn't help envisaging if I possessed all these in my life, how affluent I would be.

'Where are we?' said I with widened eyes.

'Our world is called Mogao Grottoes,' said Zizy, dipping his hand into the golden pool. 'Not like your world with so many colours. There's probably only this kind of colour here.' He scooped a small amount of yellow liquid.

However, I still remained befuddled and my mind was full of unanswered questions. What is another world? What is this world only with golden objects?

Zizy must have noticed my expression mixed with confusion and wonder.

'The great creator created a connection between planets,' said Zizy abruptly. 'There is one place on each planet which allows you to enter a different world. But there are actually more different ways for you to discover of entering them, it's just that they haven't been discovered by humans yet. That painting in the cave is one of the portals linking to another world, and it turns out it connects to our place, the Mogao Grottoes.'

It took me a while to digest the whole story.

'So, we can enter your "planet" at any time we want? Just through that painting?'

'Unless we transgress rules,' sighed Zizy, looking heavenward. 'The creator's original purpose of putting a connection within the universe is to facilitate cooperation between different beings, so there is friendship and peace among creatures regardless of their types or habitats. But for those who contravene the rule, they need to pay the price for that.'

'What price?,' asked I.

'I am not sure about that, because our planet never experienced that fortunately. I hope you won't have any chances to witness that as well. Anyways, we are friends right? I won't harm you and you won't hurt me,' said Zizy. His face was plastered with a huge smile, revealing two sharp golden fangs which gleamed with my small reflection in it. Despite the fact that he is amiable, his appearance still induced me to shiver slightly.

'Oh sure.' muttered I, forcing myself to have a cordial smile, 'We lend a hand for each other. '

Turning around, there seemed to be a black rectangular hollow floating in the mid-air, and it looked more distinguishable when all the surroundings were covered with gold. I extended my hand and fumbled around the peculiar dark gas. Slitting up my eyes, I lunged forward and the cool air swept over me again. Everything went into a state of vagueness for a moment before I seemed to have restored my sight.

There I was, standing on the rock-strewn ground again, smelling the odour inside the clammy cavern. My heart was filled with a sense of exhilaration as I knew I would make this occult cavern rise from relative obscurity to worldwide recognition. I hastily scuttled away from the painting and headed towards the mouth of the cave to meet my friends again. As I ran, the small, circular source of sunlight became larger, and so did my euphoria.

'Where have you been?' asked one of my friends.

'There is something incredible inside the cave!' exclaimed I. 'You should really bring people you know here, I am sure you will be stuck dumb.'

My friends exchanged curious gazes, while I walked out from the cave with a conceited smile. Certainly, I was going to drop a bombshell on them.

The next day, I intended to visit the cave again which was miraculously linked to another world with ubiquitous gold sparkling everywhere. Following the same route as before, I journeyed to the same place again. I watched the incandescent sky with silver clouds, objects becoming infinitesimal below the hill, and flowers swaying flamboyantly. In the whole journey I breathed the same air and watched the same view. Yet, my feelings were different. I felt like I just accomplished something great.

'Can you paint more? It's so exciting!' yelped a girl distantly.

When I was walking behind bushes and tussocks, a high-pitched clamour echoed from somewhere. Despite the fact that I might be faraway from the source, I was certain that the voices were strident.

'Calm down, I am trying already!' groaned a man.

Feeling more inquisitive, I tried to push the bushes apart and searched for the voice. However, it wasn't necessary to know about the auditory information, as the visual image attested everything.

There was the cave. Yet, the mouth of it was merely visible. The huge hollow I saw yesterday was being blocked by numerous heads, as though there were bees digging their heads in their hives. People were forcefully stampeding into the cavern,

'What is going on here?,' bellowed I, behind myriads of heads in front of me. Unfortunately, my voice was futile under the sorely obstreperous environment.

'Gold is everywhere!'

'Bidding farewell to my poor life!'

Exasperation boiled inside my chest as the tumultuous shouts from the crowd caused a throb in my ears. I squeezed through the crowd, my sleeves grazing against clothes of the exhilarated people who were capering and frolicking. It was an arduous process indeed, to eventually have some air. After pushing myself into the crowd for some moments, I stood on tiptoe and two men who were sitting on the ground emerged under plenty of heads in front of me. Bouncing twice, I vaguely saw seven to ten men holding a large brush and palette.

'What are you doing?' barked I.

'Painting for the entrance to another world, of course!' growled the man with grey beard and unkempt hair.

'Wang, thank you for telling me about this stunning place yesterday,' said my friend Ren, who appeared to be standing beside me. 'These artists are now helping our country to paint more portals to other worlds with such rich resources and wealth.'

'Ren, I didn't expect this gaggle of people all come here to plunder the resources from that place!' vociferated I, staring at him intently, 'how could you just bring nearly all people in our village to here and create chaos?'

'You see, there is really so much gold there. We won't exploit all of their resources.' said Ren assuringly. He thrust a goblet towards my chest, and the content into it stirred and scintillated frantically.

I held out my hands to grip the handle of the goblet, yet my hands couldn't help quaking like leaves. I steadily raised my head up and glanced at my surroundings. There was a moment of silence inside my mind, as though there was a door in it banishing the uproar caused by the commotion around me. I was rooted to the spot with fright and appalment.

'What have I done?' echoed a voice in my head.

The immense feeling of contrition poured all over me like rain lashing down. I didn't want to believe I had apprised my friends of the existence of the cave. I didn't want to believe people have malevolent intentions to rob things from others madly. Surprisingly, humans are terrifying. Or it was just me who was being too starry-eyed and didn't recognize the fact. Humans have always been terrifying.

Somehow, the picture of Zizy's face popped into my mind.

'Zizy, are you here?' bawled I aimlessly, in the midst of the calamitous condition inside the cavern.

There was no response. I could not subdue my impatience any longer. I endeavoured to dart towards the painting which linked to Zizy's planet, throwing caution to the wind and neglecting the risk that I might get trodden on due to the overcrowding.

'Zizy, where are you? Are you alright? We are obliged to obliterate this chaos!'

'We?' 'There was a raucous, croaky voice produced from elsewhere. A giant, squid-like creature cropped up from the gigantic rock situated next to the portal.

'Zizy, I am really sorry.' muttered I compunctiously. 'I had no idea that this is the consequence of introducing this place to others.'

'Now the impact of it is irreversible. I attempted to dissuade you people from rushing to my place, chopping down all our trees and emptying our pool, but there was no use. I even got nearly stabbed by them because of this. Besides, there are even people trying to paint and create portals themselves.'

Feeling sorely remorseful, I switched my gaze over the original painting.

'Oh my god, I will live a sumptuous life!' exclaimed a man. He staggered out of the painting embracing a good deal of shimmering leaves.

All of a sudden, a grating noise which resembled the sound of massive rocks colliding reverberated across the cavern. While people all hastily plunged into a moment of silence out of fear.

'What's that?' screamed a woman, who was clutching a handful of gold bars tightly.

'Probably the consequence.' said Zizy, gliding past the painting. 'Good luck humans, goodbye Wang.' Aloofly, he pushed the people aside who were besieging the portal. In a nimble slip, he disappeared into the rectangular frame and vanished in sight.

My heart was racing and thumping fast. I was baffled at Zizy's words at first, but seemingly I soon found out the answer myself when I noticed the gruesome transformation of the woman in front of me.

Her legs once looked as smooth as silk, but now it looked as rough as rhino's skin. The grey, rough surface disseminated from her legs to arms swiftly as if her body was going to be engulfed. The sanguine face soon transformed into a rugged continent.

'No, what...', grunted the woman, holding out his ghastly arms which were trembling. Unfortunately, the grey arms suspended in the mid-air and her mouth remained wide-opened. She had gone into a state of static, with terror clouding her features. The golden bars, which she was previously clenching, tumbled on the ground with a crisp clatter.

She has become a statue.

People screeched with desperation and attempted to escape from the cave with desperation. However, no one could evade their consequences. They ought to face their music.

They had also been taking away the money and gold voraciously, with desperation.

My eyes were brimmed with tears somehow. I didn't know if I was too alarmed about the aftermath of this, or I was simply too horrified by human.

Slitting my eyes shut, I was willing and prepared to face the consequence. I was the root of this matter after all as I was the one who discovered this cavern.

Miraculously, it seemed that nothing happened to me. I was visualizing the appearance of the statue of myself a moment ago, but I hadn't got the sensation of being paralyzed yet.

Irresolutely, I opened my eyes with my face screwed up. The shrill exclamations were no longer audible, and the people were as silent as the grave. But there was serenity and tranquility, as if everything was at ease and unperturbed. Scanning the faces of the statues, there were nothing more than agitation, distress and terror. If they had been created by sculptors, they would probably have gained much reputation by this as the facial expressions of the statues were too lifelike, and could vividly describe their actual emotions. The paintings on the ground turned greyish as well somehow, as though they were cladded by a thin cover of ash. The patterns of the gold they drew were still visible, though. The original portal was out of sight, and the place where it was originally embedded in was nothing more than a flat surface of wall.

Perhaps I was the only one who didn't do what they were doing and that's why I didn't have the consequence. But it was tragic, though, to know that I was the only one.

For years since then, the cave was long forgotten by people. Different versions of the tale passed down through generations. Some spread the rumour that some devilish spirit in the cave murdered their families and caused them missing, but I would say they murdered themselves by their own greed.

I used to have lack of courage to recollect the tale. It was horrifying indeed. But if people in the future have a chance to read this and learn the lesson, I would say this unfortunate event might be a blessing in disguise.

‘Wow, so that’s why the sculptures and paintings here are incredibly realistic.’ said William, gaping at the letter.

‘We should probably bring this back and publish it in the newspaper, people will surely do a double take. Can’t deny we might even be rewarded for discovering this remarkable history’ said David, jiggling the parchment.

‘Well, I’d say humans really didn’t change after all.’sighed William.

‘What?’ questioned David, scowling.

‘Nothing, just bring this discovery back.’ replied William with a bitter smile.

The Discovery of the Greatest Explorer of Our Time

Good Hope School, Ng, Pollia – 16

The red burning lands of this new world laid untouched on the edge of the world, quivering on the horizon with untethered vitality. Raw, primal potential radiated. Thrum---- Thrum---- Thrum---- A deep, resonant beat throbbed under the stretch of vast mountains, plains, deserts, and rivers, strong and relentless like the heart of PanGu. It powered all life within it, giving new life to everything within it.

This was something the world had never seen before.

The Land of the Red Dragon. China.

A ship with a crew of forty-four headed straight towards it. Only one among them understood the magnitude of the vast opportunity offered in front of them. It did not matter that only one understood. Only one in a million men could ever fully take advantage and soar to inexplicable heights.

While other men eventually fade into insignificance, there are some who can plant themselves into History seamlessly and fool everyone of their intentions.

James Clarke stood at the helm of the ship, erect against the wind. An old map lay open on it. His finger traced along the narrow line of the Silk Road, weaving its way towards the northwest. Just on the very precipice of the Taklamakan Desert lay the **Mogao Grottoes**, marked with a large red X. The invisible path gleamed with mystery and danger.

Clarke looked out to the coast growing nearer and nearer. There was no discernable emotion hidden among the crevices and contours of his hard face. Neither glee nor fear plagued his stoic countenance. His eyes, weathered by seasons under the thumb of God hardened, saying: I am not going back without what I came for.

Sea of Death. Another name for the Taklamakan Desert that was imprinted in Clarke's mind early in his life.

Rolling waves of sand sweeping over golden hills. The sun glinting like a gem, a slight shift in the balance of the world hailing it down to crash onto the earth, from which it would burst into thousands of sand particles that crash into dunes with fiery sparks. Tides, encompassed with bright hot energy fold over creatures that tread over the desert, until all suffocate and drown towards the red hot centre.

This combusive story was conducted in Clarke's youth with wondrous fascination, taking life from dreamy narratives of explorers he scoured for days. The red hot image seared his eyelids, blinding him in his sleep. Age took away the effects of the dreams on his reality. However, the secret excitement that harboured in the boy still remained, and he still remained faithful to the very first conception that sparked his dreams.

"Sir..." Aurel Stein, his right-hand man struggled to cut through the thick desert air to speak. "Another has gone down! There are only five men in the crew left alive. We must get to the Grottoes quick before more perish." *Alive.* At that moment, the veil separating the disoriented minds from the harsh reality of the desert was pierced through. How close did the line between life and death occur to the men!

The dunes rose higher and higher, until the golden path before them no longer was visible. On the verge of collapse, shadows of death fell upon the terrified faces of the men. The Supranatural monsters from outlandish tales of the *land of dragons* that terrorized their minds burst forth from their suspicious imagination, rendering the golden lands a queer, sinister void to them.

Once you get in, you never get out. This sentiment would never be lost among them, ever aware of the imposition of thirst and exhaustion to their frail human shells. They looked towards Clarke and invested their blind faith in his abilities to deliver them from the hellish and uncivilized landscape they saw the desert as.

Clarke was acutely aware of the urgent need to find the Grottoes. They were one life away from being dangerously close to an impossible execution of his mission. The stakes were too high.

All human control should be relinquished in favour of the pervading force of nature. Mother Nature holds no mercy for the mankind that holds no understanding of her. Clarke understood and bent the desert to his will, crossing over the Sea of Death with his expedition of five.

Small tiny black dots spotted Clarke's vision. It was not until some remembrance of an illustration from a vague past jolted him into realization: small, black cave mouths clustered together, dotting the dry landscape like splashes of ink on paper. Innumerable. Uncountable. Infinite.

Caves of A Thousand Buddhas. The Mogao Grottoes.

How many layers of history and religion laid bare deep inside the caves? Manuscripts, scrolls, sculptures, paintings hidden in dark, cool spaces where sunlight never reached. Centuries of grime and erosion that would otherwise eat away at lacquer were ward off by the sheer sacredness emitted from texts and carvings.

Clarke's eyes lighted up at the thought, golden specks of light danced in them as if reflected by the shining treasures of the chest he was peering into.

Though spanning across a ridge that extended from the East to the West, the caves merged into a single entity. Isolated from the dust and corruption raging outside, she stood high and regal, solitary in her dignity.

Relief and pride rapidly swelled in Clarke's chest. He had done what never had been done and discovered the Mogao Grottoes, as he believed in his limited mind which disregarded the impossible efforts of monks in creating it over the centuries. His perception of his own specialness grew in tandem with the men's growing closeness to the caves. The world again bloomed before his eyes like a fresh rose ready to be picked.

The admiration in the men's eyes, invigorated by Clarke's deliverance of their greatest wish only encouraged his correctness in his scheme, erasing any moral greyness surrounding it.

The imagination of James Clarke then became fully-fledged. *The hero of the hour, coming home in a grand carriage filled to the brim with priceless antiques from a distant land. He sped to the imperial palace amidst waving flags blowing in the wind in reds and purples. Cheers exploded in the streets, hailing James Clarke as the explorer of our times.* Clarke smiled, delirious with fantasies. This reinforced his resolve to complete his imperial mission of removing the sacred objects from the Mogao Grottoes in the unexplored East. Interest from his Majesty himself particularly lay in the Diamond Sutra which resided in the Library Cave, alleged to be the oldest surviving printed book in the world.

While Clarke indulged in his delirium, increasingly growing with the hot temperature, the men had finally reached their destination. Divine power interfered and disallowed any further movements of stepping into the caves. They stood there dumbly and waited with glassy eyes.

"My Good Men. Do not hesitate now. The time has come. Fatigue, thirst or even fear will not triumph over the might of our loyalty to Great Britain. There only remains one more stage in our conquest. Let us take courage and take up our duty as the brave explorers of tomorrow. For the glory of the country!" Clarke affirmed.

"For the glory of the country!" The men repeated with vigour.

They ran in a cave in a great rush of patriotic emotion, but found no throne, nor presider's chair, nor decorated seat in the open hall indicative of a monk of authority. A steady flow of monks, homogenous to the eyes of the foreigners went in and out of the eight doors, unperturbed and uniform.

"Can I see the leader of the monks?" asked Clarke. The obnoxious tone of his voice shattered the sanctity of silence. "Hello? You, monk with the orange robe." Ten heads turned simultaneously. Clarke hesitated and recovered. He pointed to the nearest monk rudely and barked, "I need to meet with the leader of the monks. Go fetch him."

The monk's eyes widened in silent alarm. The other monks' did too. Though some were Chinese, Tibetan, and Uighur and had a diverse education on various languages, they were not accustomed to the foreign man's dialect which bit the air harshly. The sound distressed them. He and his men looked like dogs barking madly in their shouting with no intelligible words audible.

A strong gust of wind blew. The raised voices of the men faded with it. A calm silence hung in the air. Silence that swept away agitated feelings, and left the mind blank. The senses opened up and flowered like blossoms in the height of spring, exposing every sensitised sense to the gentle humming thrumming under the cool, earthy ground. A monk emerged inconspicuously from some hidden crevice of a painted wall embellished with rich vivacious colours. The bright tangerine of his robe melted in with the glow of the tones which shone in the soft rays of the sun.

Clarke jolted. He had almost mistaken the monk for the statues of Buddha standing motionless and serene in the eight corners of the octagonal hall until it moved of its own accord. Order resumed once again. The monks disturbed returned to their original routine out of instinct as if they had never shown up.

"All men are made equal under the eyes of the Buddha. There is no leader of the monks. However, if you are looking for the monk in charge, I am the Abbot." The monk said in English with a heavy tang in his accent. His eyes met Clarke's, and Clarke was startled to find wisdom and age resting placidly on the dark waters of his eyes.

"Abbot." Clarke bowed deeply, and the men followed suit.

"How may I help you?"

The rehearsed lines, practised automatically in Clarke's head sprang into action. "Your Heavenly Venerable. I am James Clarke, *the* British merchant of tea and spices. Over the years, I have found much success in trading along the Silk Road. However, they were lonely years. Years spent with no anchor to weight my heart down. I went adrift, steered by the restless winds of the ocean and always sought wistfully for inner peace." His face was contorted into unnatural animations strangely disturbing to the human eyes. "The Mogao Grottoes had always lived in my dreams since I was a young boy. Peaceful and serene like the sea lapping gently at the shore on a bright day. I am only more fascinated since then, hearing stories from traders and locals in Lanzhou and Urumqi. Would I myself ever be able to experience the glorious sensation of holding aged scrolls from the famed Library Cave in my hands? I've thought of it for a long time and came to the conclusion that I am ready to lay down my roots. My loyal men and I would like to seek your Venerable's humble counsel in learning the ways of a monk and becoming one."

Silence.

Something flickered in the Abbot's eyes, causing ripples on its calm waters. What was an immediate deduction of the foreigners' intentions would never occur to the men to happen. Doubt or suspicion on their perfect plan, which completely relied on the presumption of the monks' dim-wittedness was beyond the realm of impossibility. Regardless, the Abbot still knew.

"Please follow me." The Abbot said. "And please leave behind your worldly possessions. There will be no need of them." He added.

"I—uh." Clarke and the men scampered to catch up with the Abbot. "What do you mean 'no need'? There are materials of *extreme* high importance in those bags." Clarke stressed heavily. The excavation of scrolls and manuscripts depended on the maps, tools and apparatus from the bags, as well as precious skins and furs they brought for bribery purposes.

The Abbot walked on.

"Brother James. One cannot truly accept the teachings of the Buddha without learning the subtle art of not giving a damn. Let everything go. That is the way of the monks."

Let everything go. This was an impossible ideal that astounded Clarke to the core. The mission. His men. The Diamond Sutra. There was no room in his mind for silly fancies that floated along the swirling cornices of clouds. It is only a principle for the wild or the senseless to adopt, he thought.

Clarke suddenly was starkly aware of an imposing presence on his thoughts. He turned his head and saw something that left him feeling violated beyond reason: the opened eyes of a Buddha statue.

"Finally, Sir. Your years of planning have come into fruition. We must find the Library Cave and remove the scrolls now."

"Not quite yet. We do not necessarily have the resources to conduct the excavation. We shall instead bide our time and gain access to the cave through trust."

"Trust? That is ludicrous. What use is trust against the quick results of deception? We must use the monks' gullibility to our advantage. I must remind you Sir, his Imperial Majesty is urgently awaiting good news for our expedition."

"Trust is the only way to obtain secrets. Only then can we use our advantage to the fullest. Don't you fret, Aurel. Trust always ends in betrayal."

The time in the Grottoes was the most Clarke has abstained from alcohol, cigars, and red meat. Temptations had to be kept out of reach, as dictated by Buddhist rules. Yet, Clarke's mind was no more clearer than in his self-indulgent and excessive life in England.

Every day had a dim, hazy cast over it. Hours were allocated to praying, medicating, and reading which melded into months and years. It added routine and uniformity to his otherwise turbulent and everchanging life which always moved him from one place to the next. Being anchored to the Grottoes removed him from the city which so powered and pumped his ambitions. Somehow, this also diluted his hard personality. He could be found most of the time reading, writing and conversing with scholars and monks, which repeated everyday habitually produced several manuscripts under his pen.

He had let go of everything.

The pleas of his impatient men fell on deaf ears. He, possessed by some divine power had completely let go of the sacred mission he had so insistently pursued upon. The patriotic streak had waned and withered. However, this was not the same for his men who once pledged their unwavering loyalty to Clarke. The prolonged stay away from home only made them restless and inflamed their resentful spirits. Arguments arose endlessly between Aurel and Clarke, oblivious to the extent of Aurel's rage and discontent.

In his distrust of Clarke, Aurel developed the frequent habit of spying on him. It was that action that brought on the final straw which saw Clarke's betrayal to his men returned to him violently.

“Brother James. You have given me your trust over the years.” What followed was a long conversation between the Abbot and Clarke on trust and faith that bored Aurel out of his mind.

“Let me grant you the location of the Library Cave that you desired for long ago, which is--” His ears just about caught the last few words of the Abbot. He was stunned.

He staggered back to the quarters, delirious with fantasies. He waited for Clarke to burst into the men’s rooms and words they have been waiting for to tumble out of his mouth. *We have the location of the Library Cave. Let us finish what we started. My men, the deception is over and we can revert to our original selves.*

He waited, and waited, and waited, till the sun set and the moon rose. Clarke never showed.

The sting of betrayal tasted bitter in his mouth.

The next morning during the morning prayers, the halls were empty except for the Library Cave. Something desecrating was happening. Shelves and shelves of manuscripts were turned over; sheets and sheets of paper were scattered all over; scrolls and scrolls filled bags to the brim. Those deemed useless were abandoned and trampled over in the search for the Diamond Sutra.

One man looked over this operation haughtily. Aurel watched as every advantage that ever came his way unfolded under his direction and reveled in this moment that he longed for so long.

Suddenly, Clarke burst into the cave and commanded the men to stop weakly. No one obeyed. He ran towards Aurel and tried to rip his hand away from a shelf of untouched scrolls. But the desperation of Clarke could not compare to the might of young, burning ambition.

Clarke was instantly struck down after a short struggle. His skull smashed against the ground and he bled out. As the red stained the holy ground, the men cheered for the success of their conquest.

Aurel Stein’s expedition team rode back to Britain in grand carriages filled with scrolls and manuscripts from the distant East. They sped to the imperial palace amidst waving flags blowing in reds and purples. Cheers exploded in the streets, hailing Aurel Stein as the explorer of our time.

The discovery of the Mogao Grottoes went down in history books, recognizing the young and ambitious explorer, Aurel Stein as the key element in the success of the expedition. After the new, shiny books were shelved in grand libraries, they laid there untouched, growing old and musty in the dust of the empty libraries.

Meanwhile, a few hundred years later, manuscripts in the familiar tongue of English were uncovered from the famed Library Cave of the Mogao Grottoes. The whole world was entranced by the tales of the Mogao Grottoes. What did James Clarke discover in the Mogao Grottoes?

Far away in the Taklamakan Desert stood a magnificent structure invested with the grand power of unshakeable faith. Faith within its walls seeped into every culture that met it in the course of human and celestial history. Centuries of people walked on in their short lives, oblivious to the golden threads eternally tying them to it.

Lost and Found

Heep Yunn School, Chu, Sui Lam – 17

The twenty-sixth year of Emperor Qianlong's reign, May 1761

'The Emperor has sent a decree!'

Upon the haughty screech of the Imperial Eunuch, the steady rhythm of a potter's wheel grinding against a cobblestone base came to a brief stop, with the quick succession of scrambling and trampling of footsteps disrupting the air of serenity in the Bureau of Manufacturing. As the commotion settled down, reassuming the quietude with notes of tension, every painter, sculptor and gardener knelt down to listen to the words of the Almighty, which could determine the very moment they took their last kneel.

'By the order of His Majesty, the Bureau of Manufacturing is to send 20 painters and 35 sculptors to the Mogao Grottoes in Dunhuang in servitude of the restoration of the Buddhist monuments. The composition of the team is to be decided by the head of the bureau and approved by His Majesty before the expedition by the end of the month.'

Jiang Shen-ying and Ye Qi turned towards each other, unable to determine who was in greater disbelief. All they had known, from the moment they stepped through vermilion and gold-studded gates of the Forbidden City, was that they would dedicate their craftsmanship to an oasis of crimson red walls and emerald green tiles, but not any grotto that contained the quintessential existence of the Buddha.

'Where in the Great Qing is Dunhuang anyway?' Ye Qi muttered as he shakily rose from the ground, afraid that his ignorance would stir up unwanted attention.

'Somewhere on the west side I suppose, Master Lang said his Italian ancestors would pass by there for trade.'

'Sounds fascinating.'

'Typical of you to be optimistic about everything,' Jiang Shen-ying scoffed. 'Sounds like hard labour a criminal is forced to do.'

'I mean we've done nothing wrong in our time at the palace, there's no way we would be sent.'

As if a jinx had been triggered by the statement, the head of the bureau walked towards them, like a grim reaper preparing to harvest the newly deceased souls, and in the very monotonous voice one would imagine, flatly announced: 'You two are leading the expedition to the grottoes.'

'But I have a family here,' Jiang protested.

'We all have families, also the Emperor's orders.'

Emperor's orders, an argument he was destined to lose. Jiang could only hold his tongue as he stared blankly at the man swiftly scribbling his name down on a piece of parchment.

'I have no idea why you're complaining,' Ye said, genuinely confused.

'Imagine being away from family, opportunities to be promoted to a higher rank, and all things dear to you. Only youngsters like you get excited by adventure.'

'Only people like you who have too much to lose are afraid of letting go.'

Only people like you who have too much to lose are afraid of letting go. A string of words that had unconsciously clung onto the walls of his cerebrum, unwilling to let go. For Jiang Shen-ying, the final night in the bureau quarters was as gruelling as the many sleepless ones he had had following up to the impending odyssey. He glanced over at Ye Qi, who had long fallen into a deep slumber in preparation for a 'treacherous' journey ahead.

How wonderful it is to be young and carefree, he thought, what would I give to experience the adrenaline of being naive?

Nothing came to him. He had too much to lose.

Desperate for a panacea to his turmoil, he searched in his baggage, fumbling in the dark while feeling for the bumpy texture of raised fibres, smooth silky edges, and round rigid beads. Finally, a pouch, embroidered by his wife, came to his reach. Loosening the drawstrings, his right hand felt for his buddhist chains of coral and agarwood, concentrating on the cyclical motions as the orbs rubbed against his flesh and seemingly carried away his apprehension like a spinning waterwheel.

How ironic, he thought, what's causing me the unease is calming me down.

He reached deeper into his sack until his fingers brushed against something coarse, like parchment. It was a letter from home, a reply to one of the most difficult news he had to put pen to paper for. There was an irresistible urge to unfold the sheet of paper, probably because it was the last piece of written correspondence he would hear from his family for a while.

Dear Shen-ying,

How cruel it is for us to be separated not just by the walls of the Forbidden City, but also by the deserts! But do not worry about us; your parents are doing fine, the children are healthy, we are all in a stable position in the capital. May you be looked after wherever you go within the sky's limit. Write to me as soon as you arrive so we know you survived the journey. I miss you terribly; do come home when you return, I trust that you will someday.

Love,

Jing-lian

'It'll be over soon enough,' he muttered to himself, 'there will be an end to it. There will be...'

The twenty-sixth year of Emperor Qianlong's reign, July 1761

Jiang Shen-ying did not think he would survive the trip. Every beam of sun ray had soaked up drips of sweat accumulated on his forehead, leaving his skin unshielded from the unforgiving heat. By the end of each day of traversing sand dune after sand dune, trails of red scorch marks seeped down from head to toe like molten lava, searing the dermis and inflicting unbearable pain on every inch of his skin. For weeks, the view was a barren wasteland in a static hue of ochre until the first manmade infrastructure appeared not as a mirage, but a prevailing testament of their endurance.

As if the journey to Dunhuang was not arduous enough, the expedition had led to a range of mountains, with a powdery tan sheath layered on a row of rugged rocks, like a blanket on the scales of a dormant dragon. There was no clearly marked trail amongst the slabs and boulders; only a partly torn map in their possession to navigate the jagged greyish-tan mass. The struggle to reach the grottoes dealt a heavy blow to the muscles and morale of the men, including Jiang Shen-ying and Ye Qi.

'My legs are about to give out.' Jiang exasperated.

'The last place for you to die is on this mountain, think about your family.'

Ye was right; he had come a long way from leaving behind his wife and children, a stable career, a life of relative peace to a distant town at the frontiers – he had too much to lose.

At long last, they caught the sight of wooden pillars and dusted red tiles carved into a wall of sandstone displaying monogrammed illustrations of celestial beings and Buddhas, marking the entrance to the Mogao Grottoes. There stood a monk, clothed in muslim and holding a string of jewelled beads that glimmered under the blinding sunlight. Assuring that they would make a stoic impression in the face of a living embodiment of laity, Jiang made attempts to fix their disheveled appearances before approaching the monk.

‘I, Jiang Shen-ying, greet you, Bhante Chen.’

‘I repay you with the same courtesy, Mr Jiang. It is a great pleasure to receive your presence.’

‘By the order of the Emperor, we are to restore the Mogao Grottoes to its former artistic glory.’

‘I thank the Emperor for his devotion to upholding the Buddhist faith. May you and your compatriots leave your belongings with my fellow monks as they are to manage your lodgings in our monastery. Please follow me into the caves.’

Jiang tried to hide his suspicious glances from the monk, fearing the potential risks of losing his valuables. Yet, the more he suppressed his worries, the more jittery he became.

‘Excuse me, Bhante Chen, I’d like to take my belongings with me.’

‘In face of the Buddha, we must set aside our materialistic desires to achieve enlightenment.’

No point arguing with a monk about Buddhism, he thought.

The monk led the team of imperial artists into the tunnel, in which the moisture-laden air was a welcoming change from the acute exposure to the suffocating desert air. The drastic reduction in light levels dimmed their vision, obfuscating the passageway into a caliginous blur. Jiang ran his palm against the gravel conglomerate walls in an attempt to maneuver the labyrinth of rock-cut corridors. He was not certain if Ye Qi or any of his men could see where they were heading, but they were fortunate enough to have the best audio guide they could ever ask for – Bhunte Chen’s narration on the history of the grottoes.

‘Back in the Han Dynasty, a monk called Le Zun witnessed a marvellous sight of the golden Maitreya Buddha levitating in the sky with a thousand others. Fairies descended from the heavens above, strumming sweet melodies that soothed the minds of mortals. He decided to recreate the visions with his exceptional skills of painting and sculpting in these caves. For centuries, the Mogao Grottoes had been a place of pilgrimage and worship for the monks, filled with sutras, depictions, sculptures. These sacred treasures were rediscovered last year in the urban development of Dunhuang, after the desertion of the Silk Road.’

He then continued, noticing the artists were listening intently for his voice. ‘We are going to Cave 85, which was dug out in the late Tang Dynasty. It is paramount that you clear your mind of vain desires of wealth and balance your emotions as you devote yourself to the craftsmanship of the Buddhist faith.’ He turned towards the group of men, and solemnly said, ‘Only then can your art encapsulate the essence of Buddhism.’

The men eventually found themselves sauntering towards a light source, which turned out to be a myriad of candelabras illuminating an otherwise sombre chamber with the gentle glimmer of flickering flames. Attention was instantly drawn towards the hazy lines that made up the silhouette of a sculpted Buddha statue, majestically overlooking its loyal worshippers as the centerpiece of the hall, with its ever-placid facial expressions. The stone entity was guarded by two monk figurines, one on each side, and all painted to look lifelike. But years of desolation and disrepair had left the sculptures appearing half-stone and half-human; the tangerine robes adorned by the monks were fading back into its original stone grey hue; flesh-coloured ‘skin’ were riddled with cracks and holes; one of the monks had a missing eye.

Jiang shifted his focus to the walls, permeated with murals of Buddhas, Bodhisattvas and heavenly fairies outlined in the faintest shade of carnelian red as they meditated, danced, and enjoyed the fruits of living under a backdrop of sky blue — or was it turquoise? He could not demarcate the exact shade under candlelight, but visibly evident were the fractures on what would have been an exquisite story of Buddhist craftsmanship. Eight millennia of weathering and exposure to the elements had left their mark on the vanishing paint, once undisturbed like the surface of a still lake in an oasis, now encroached by the primitive reality of the cave like a dried up stream in the

dead of winter, and tarnished by the blackened traces of smoke from burning incense. Here stood the former splendor of a cave that beheld the memories of the golden days of the Silk Road, when monks, vagrants and travellers all alike came to pay tribute to her magnificence, but had now grown cold from human interaction, like an ageing concubine who had won the favour of the Emperor with her incomparable beauty, but abandoned as wrinkles crept onto her flawless skin – a poignant tale.

‘Thankfully the ceiling did not wear off as much, or else you would have a lot more to paint.’

Upon hearing the words of the monk, Jiang looked up, bedazzled by the intricate embellishments of lotus flowers, monasteries, and more heavenly fairies descending from the very tip of roofing. Gradients of zentangle patterns in shades of blues, greens and reds were layered orderly row upon row on the slanting sides of the ceiling. It was like an ornamental necklace a court lady would wear with her most extravagant gowns; the epitome of Chinese artisanship.

‘How long will you stay here?’

Dragged back to reality, Jiang stared blankly at the monk for a moment before replying, in a noticeably defeated tone.

‘Till work is completed, unless the Emperor says otherwise, Bhuante Chen.’

Dear Jing-lian,

May your agonising wait cease upon reading this letter. I have arrived, safely accommodated in a monastery in Dunhuang. Your prayers are with me for this entire journey; they give me the much-needed strength to persevere in the worst of conditions. How are the children? Are my parents in good shape?

When the ordeal is over, I cannot wait to come back to the capital to see my beloved ones. Wait for me, as I will wait for the day we can reunite as one family. It will be over soon enough, I hope.

Love,

Shen-ying

‘Writing a letter to your family?’

Jiang, startled by Ye’s sudden appearance, dropped his calligraphy brush.

‘Got to let them know I’m... alive.’

‘Do you think we’ll grow old and die in this miserable place?’ Ye asked abruptly.

‘Depends on how long it takes to revive the artwork to its initial flair.’

‘We’re going to devote our entire careers to repainting a cave then.’

He’s finally seeing through the facade of this adventure, thought Jiang.

‘Hide the disconcertment tomorrow. In the words of Bhuante Chen, we absolutely must balance our emotions as we devote ourselves to the craftsmanship of the Buddhist faith.’

‘Very funny.’

The thirty-fourth year of Emperor Qianlong’s reign, November 1789

Eight years passed like flowing currents of a stream. As the walls and sculptures were being repainted with bright pigments of carmine, aquamarine and emerald, Jiang Shen-ying sensed the draining of colour from his own complexion. He was no longer the man who had survived thousands of miles of trekking deserts and ridges, but a frail body encased with a soul at peace with art, without the hopes of ever reaching the peak of his career as an Imperial artist, righteously serving His Majesty. Perhaps it was the effect of working in a sacred place, or that his ambitious aura had died out.

But he had one last yearning – to see his family once again.

Jiang was in the process of outlining one of the buddhas when the steadiness of his grip was interceded by vigorous pats on his shoulder. Frustrated at the sabotage, he turned around to study the face of the culprit, only to see a distressed Ye Qi.

‘I need a word with you outside.’

As soon as they left the grottoes, Ye spoke gravely.

‘Before I say anything, I just want you to know that life twists and turns in the most peculiar ways – I mean, we’ve never thought our careers would end up like this. But the main point is, whatever life throws at you, let it go, don’t let it consume your life.’

‘Enough with the clichés, get to the point.’

‘Your family – you know, there was an outbreak of smallpox, a very scary one, and they... they all died,’ Ye exclaimed, finally spitting out these weighty words.

Jiang froze.

Silence.

‘All of them?’

‘All of them.’

Hows and Whys were jumbled up in Jiang’s mind. Incoherent sentences were formulated but never came out of his mouth. Numbness, the only tangible sentiment he could express.

‘The Emperor himself ordered their funeral,’ Ye said. ‘The messenger also brought silvers and a letter as consolation for your loss.’

He handed Jiang a letter and a pouch.

Back in his room, Jiang, with fidgeting hands, had trouble unravelling the contents of the last written correspondence he would ever receive from home. It was the same unease he felt eight years ago, on the night before he departed for the Mogao Grottoes.

Jing-lian’s pouch. He remembered upon the memory, and proceeded to hungrily seek the traces of his wife’s embroidery.

As he unbolted a chest containing his possessions, he was met with a devastating sight – dead moths surrounding scraps of silk, cotton threads and loose beads spread out in a disorganised assortment, together forming a circle around a chain of coral and agarwood, still intact with their spherical wholeness. All that was left was his Buddhist chains.

He reached for the string of wood and jewels, concentrating on the cyclical motions as the orbs rubbed against his flesh and seemingly carried away his apprehension, just the way it always did. Regaining his composure, he laid open the delicate sheet of parchment, imprinted with hastily scribbled strokes of handwriting which marked the final fleeting moments of his wife’s life.

Dear Shen-ying,

By the time you read this letter, I may or may not be living under the same sky as you. Your parents, your children and I have been chosen to depart for a world where the sky is not a limit to our existence. I’m afraid I’ll have to break the promise of waiting for you to come home.

But before I go, I need you to know that the position you hold in my heart will last for an eternity, even after death do us part. Fate has led our souls to intertwine with each other; we will reunite someday, whether in the afterlife or another life.

Eternally yours,

Jing-lian

All I have sought for in life has gone up in smoke, Jiang reminisced.

There was a bizarre sense of serenity in him instead of bitterness, perhaps instilled by the Buddhist faith, or rather, that he had nothing left to lose.

The Unbreakable Bond of Dunhuang

Heep Yunn School, Lee, Tsz Wing Jacie – 15

I dashed into the cave with a grand entrance with the traditional design of the Sui Dynasty, close to the tail of the Han soldiers who were trying to hide from us. The Hans had been ruling this place after the Sui for two hundred years. As I entered the cavern, I couldn't help but stare in awe at the gigantic creation these people had created in this cavern. I carefully scanned the walls covered with huge artifacts while clenching my spear tightly, searching carefully for the presence of the Han people. I almost forgot breathing from the astonishment having seen the enormous Buddhist carvings and paintings, all coated with a layer of yellow dust, which seemed to be concealing the glistening layer of gold beneath. I reminded myself, I was sent here to tear down the religious artifacts created by the Han people, after eliminating them.

There was a colorful sculpture on the center wall, which particularly caught my attention with his exceptionally shiny brown eyes which shimmered in the dim environment, even though the whole sculpture was covered in dust. It stood out from the other ordinary sculptures, giving me a sense of tranquility even when I was in the middle of the war.

I brushed off the dirt on the eyes of the Buddha with my bare hands, shaking the clingy dust off my fingers. My mind began to flood with the thoughts of my past, stimulating the distaste inside of me.

I was born in a conservative Buddhist family. Growing up as a child, I was never allowed to taste meat, never allowed to play with the opposite gender, never allowed to kill any insects. I didn't have any friends nor people to talk to since most of them are deterred by my "weird" practices of meditation.

I was taught to meditate to calm myself. Yet, my parent opposed to the meditation which filled my brain with daydreams and ideas, especially the series of paintings I drew. They were considered gory and bloody. Such practices were humiliating and embarrassing to me, especially when I was a teenager, who was taught in class the significance to fight for the nation and if necessary, kill for our country.

I was taught that there were three lifetimes, each interconnected with the deeds you have done in each lifetime, so that we have to be kind in order to be reborn in a good life. Such doctrines were illegal in our nation, and they were the reasons why my parents got massacred in the Glorified Purge for Buddhist to cleanse our country, Yi. At last, I grew up to be an absolute atheist like how every one of my friends was, and became a soldier for the country after leaving school at the age of 17. I was glorified to be able to defeat our age-long nemesis – the Han Dynasty myself, to take the matter of our country into my own hands.

I frowned upon the buddha sculpture in front of me to show my distaste, and the buddha seemed so offended that I swear I saw that it lost composure as it squinted its eyes at me, replying to my criticism.

Did the Buddha just squint at me? I rubbed my eyes in shock, and saw the sculpture twitching back to its original position, returning to the relaxed expression, making me more confused than ever.

"Hurry up soldier, what on earth are you staring at?!" My thoughts were cut off suddenly.

'Sorry Sir!' I turned around to look at the commander, Dum Gai, who has heroically defeated multiple nations with his guidance. Before I knew it, the commander threw a spear towards the sculpture right on the chest, clearly stating his order.

"Curiosity killed the cat, I heard it from a traveller, now catch up and move!" The commander exclaimed as I quickened my pace immediately to follow up with him. We and the few others were the only survivors after the ambush, and the commander could not afford to lose one more chance to fully eliminate our enemy.

Before leaving the area, I took a quick glance back at the Buddha sculpture, relieved to see its expression was just my pure hallucination from the exhaustion, then continued hunting the soon-to-be-dead Han soldiers.

The caverns were a complete maze, each room with unique Buddhist art.

Never have I seen art on such a large scale where every surface room was occupied by either Buddhist paintings or other paintings. One room in particular had such a mesmerizing design – from far away the designs were no more than colored stripes and patterns; but when observed closely, the walls were covered with detailed mythical characters, conveying stories purely on the walls. I was intrigued by them at first but my interest died down soon enough as the dehydration came. The air was composed of dirt and nothing else, and I choked multiple times suffocating from the abundance of dust.

We kept on moving as best as we could.

As time passed and we saw hundreds of Buddhist paintings all gold-toned, our team was lost in the hours, worn out from our strained eyes searching for traces of any enemies.

“Bang!” Our team was knocked off from the drowsy state of mind and we immediately tensed up, glancing around for the origin of the strange sound. Finally, a shine of hope– to destroy the Hans. On instinct, I darted towards the direction of the sound, unaware that I was leaving our team and singled out. I pushed away the fatigue dragging onto my body and lifted up my spirit to continue, swiftly quickening my pace. As I sprinted towards the sound, the paintings on the walls seemed to be waving at me, as if signaling me to stop while spreading their hands out towards me. I brushed off the uncomfortable gut feeling tingling up my spine and ran into the first cave without any further pathway in the whole cavern.

There they were. The injured Han soldiers, staring at me with their dim hope, lying and sitting weakly on the bloody floor, filling the air with fresh aroma of flesh. With their powerless arms, they pointed towards the only exit, mouthing some words like “go...collapse...” that I couldn’t hear. There was a subtle vibration underneath, but it was unnoticeable compared to my mission.

With the lingering hatred, I was like a predator ready to dine on its prey, giving me the greatest sense of achievement. As I held up the spear and took a step closer, the injured soldiers didn't even attempt to stop me, allowing themselves to be slaughtered.

Should I do it? Aren’t they defenceless right now? They couldn’t do any harm anyways. Seeing their despair, I hesitated. After a brief moment, I broke through the force and slashed-

Before the blade hit the skin of the soldiers, I felt a strong shock beneath me, then the roof started crumbling and the room shook intensely. I was thrown backwards away from my target and a wall of rocks collapsed in front of me, dividing me and the Han soldiers.

Was this what the Han people and the sculptures warned me about? As I was isolated in complete darkness, my mind swirled with the thought that it was all the Buddha’s fault, luring me into a trap, but at the same time doubting if it were the intentions of the Han soldiers.

Look how the tables have turned, and now I am the one to face the inevitable death. Perhaps the hesitation was right? No. I affirmed myself. If I had not hesitated, I would have been the hero of the country, not just a nameless soldier dead in an accident.

Suddenly, a gleam of light shone through the cracks, and the obstacle in front of me shattered into pieces, producing dusty clouds that blinded me. Shocked to know that someone had come to me, I started doubting if it was more Han soldiers hunting me down. I began recalling moments before I killed the injured soldiers, but from the perspective of a prey. Or was God actually real and he was on his way to save me? I was torn between the two

ends, with one side suggesting that the existence of God was perhaps real, another mocking my overconfidence and weakness.

Overthinking has shaken my firm belief in success and religion, throwing me into an unfamiliar battlefield. I gripped my shield and spear tighter than ever, but I could clearly feel myself trembling and the endless sweating, letting loose of my grip. Was I drowning in the darkness and a savior has come to pull me from the deep seas, or has the fisherman come to tear my fins off for their lunch? I was like an ant under a magnifier, exposed to danger helplessly, waiting for my imminent death.

Slowly opening my eyes from the irritating light, I could barely make out a silhouette not of the Han armour nor the armour from our country, then who was it? As my vision adjusted, the figures of a group of people appeared. It started with an orangey blur, and then their features started becoming more clear. They were wearing an orange robe with splattered paint all over, each holding a tool, looking at me with confusion and caution. Some were bald, others with a towel over their head and over their mouth and nose. They were nothing like the Han people. No braids, no hats. Who were they? They seemed to be monk workers as seen from their dripping sweat down their face and popping veins from tedious physical work. Even though we were told to eliminate the Han soldiers, we were ordered not to hurt the Han civilians. Gaining full visual sense, the pungent smell of paint struck me but I stood firm despite the nausea, remembering my sole task here.

I stepped out to show that I was no harm, and the people seemed puzzled but welcoming, all concerned about my health after I came out of the collapsed cave. They were puzzled and so was I after leaving the collapsed cave,

The cave was now different. Most paintings were gone, and so were the carvings, all turned into the original rough and rocky walls. It was as if I entered another cavern, one that was unexplored and undeveloped.

Seeing me dazed, the workers kindly offered to lead me to the exit. Then I remembered my mission, to look for traces of Han.

"Have you seen traces of any of your soldiers around here?"

"Sorry, what soldiers?"

"Han, Han soldiers! I was ordered to search for them, now tell me."

"Sir, I don't think you get it, it's the Sui Dynasty here, not Han. The Han Dynasty does not exist, you must be very perplexed."

Sui? That was two hundred years ago before they were defeated by Han and disappeared, these people had got to be kidding. I was going to slay them, but I suddenly remembered the empty walls on my way to the exit. Was it why there weren't any carvings on the walls that were there when I walked in? Did I travel back to the Sui Dynasty? Stars circled my head and a wave of faintness hit me, then seconds after I fell onto the floor unconscious from the dehydration.

I woke up with a fresh bucket of water over my head, and the monks told me I had been unconscious for a whole day. Was it all a dream? I couldn't believe the fact that I wasn't in my own time. I asked everyone I ran into for the time, and was almost kicked out of the caverns for nuisance.

Day after day I returned to the opening of the cave, only to see a full Silkroad full of travellers to Sui, not Han; day after day I returned to the collapsed cave, standing there for hours at a time, only to realize nothing happened. For days I sat at the corridors, staring towards nothing in the distance, often shooed away by workers passing through the hallways. I was totally trashed, but the kindhearted monks still provided me with food and a place to stay at night.

One day, I gave up. There was no way to return and there was no point in living here. I was no way close to the people here and I wouldn't be able to fit into the society anyways. I started wandering aimlessly, searching for scraps of leftovers to purely keep myself alive. To my surprise, right after I started exploring the cave, I realized that all the paintings I was going to destroy were the enormous effort people put in to show love for their Buddha. I watched a group of miners digging out more caves which our team were in trying to find the Han, a group of workers scraping the pieces poking out of the wall to smooth the surface out, a group of paintings mixing and applying paint onto the blank canvas of the cave. The project consisted of such unimaginable effort with the concentration of many talents, and the determination of everyone to create the ideal paintings to demonstrate their respect towards Buddhism.

Why should I give up easily from finding my way home after just a short period of time?

Then I saw a Buddhist sculpture, not coloured, but its delicacy extraordinarily visible. Without colour, the Buddha still had its way of shining. Its features were so distinct and well-sculpted that I could visualize the Buddha clearly without the need of colours. The Buddha was smiling reassuringly with familiarity, peacefully looking out for the people in need, as if reassuring me to continue on.

I watched day and night as the workers flooded the cave with their blood and sweat, and their spiking willingness to engage in this drudgery, all for their pursuit of religion. Every wall smoothed, every inch painted, every cave created – all of these were pure contributions from the workers who create a cave full of artifacts here in Mogao to pay tribute to Buddhism.

All my life I have never seen people work so hard together to construct an art archive for the future. If they could work endlessly so hard and construct such amazing cave under oppression, why shouldn't I continue to strive for my goals?

Seeing the Sui people take part in a project so selflessly for others to worship in, I realize the amusingly limited horizon I had for trying to completely destroy the cave, ignoring the effort and the endless perseverance of the people. If that many people unite just to construct a cave, it is truly impossible to break the bond of the massive community of Buddhist followers with such indestructible determination. Their strong faith was greatly admirable, boosting my strength and mindset to navigate home, motivating me to carry on.

To stop relying on the monks for basic needs, I joined the team as a miner to work in the grottoes to earn some money. The job was laborious and tiring, but seeing the sweat and tears the Sui people devoted into the caverns, I couldn't give up easily like that. One night on my way to dig a new cave, I saw the colourful Buddha sculpture again, smiling at me reassuringly, and at that moment I realized it was the uncoloured figure I saw when I wandered in the grottoes– The Buddha gleamed with the blinding lights, and started speaking.

“Do not underestimate the bond of Buddhism, nor the determination of my people. Alone we can do so little, together we can do so much. Carry on soldiers, and you shall see the fruits of your labour.”

This time I was positive I wasn't hallucinating after hearing other colleagues about their tales of the Buddhas speaking in this magical cave. Compared to the first few weeks I arrived here, I was filled with the most faith and hope I have ever had in my life, and every heartbeat pounded greater, pumping more energy for me to continue on with life, even when there seemed to be no road to carry on. I wasn't the same person anymore, I had a goal in life, and for the first time I knew what I was reaching for, not just blindly following the flow of others.

As I mined effortfully through a cave, my pickaxe charged through the wall – There was an opening behind this wall... My arms swung harder than ever, and my curiosity and nervousness urged me to pull down the whole wall quickly. As the wall finally fell, I saw myself standing in front of some injured soldiers, gripping on the spear that was broken after the collapse of the cave.

Knowing the cave would collapse, I screamed as loud as I could, “It is going to collapse! GO!”, but my past self couldn’t hear me, only the Han soldiers could. They pointed their fingers at me, and mouthed towards my past self.

Unexpectedly, the past me seemed to have noticed the odds, and rushed out of the cave before the walls crumbled. However, the two of us could not exist together, and having convinced my past self out of the situation, the consequence of ‘me’ was inevitable.

Yes, I would be the soldier that died in a collapsed cave, but I would also be the miner to die having saved others. The Mogao caverns have taught me the art of determination, and I shall die having returned home, having fulfilled my purpose here – saving my past self and the Han soldiers.

I smiled peacefully, welcoming everything that would follow.

Tales from the Mogao Grottoes

Hong Kong Baptist University Affiliated School Wong Kam Fai Secondary and Primary School,

Cheung, Prudence – 16

He watched the heatwaves dance. He reached out for his jug, only to find that there was no water left in it. Parched, he fell. Bits of moisture slowly slipped away as he breathed through his mouth. The boiling weather was wearing down on him, but he knew the Truth of Suffering well, that he must endure until he reaches his destination.

His feet dragged along the sandy trail. The heat was climbing up his leg by every step, slicing through his skin. With each stingy sensation, he thought back on his decision of setting foot on this journey. Then again, he knew he must endure.

As the sun traveled downwards, his senses slowly slipped away by each diminishing ray of light. He arrived at the foot of the mountain, worn out and famished. He looked up to the mighty hill that stood in front of him. The sun slipped behind the mountain and beamed itself. The monk observed the shadows on the ground and dazed off at the sight of a thousand Buddhas, until a piece of black silk was tied over his eyes.

The monk woke up when the sun finished one full journey. He decided to visit this shrine who has bestowed the presence of a thousand Buddhas to him. He heaved his way up, only to find nothing but a cliff opposite to the mountain. If it was anyone else, they would've packed their bags and left for home. Yet he saw it as a place free from the interference of secular life. So, he made his way up to the cliff, and dug a Buddha grotto. He spent his time in the cave studying, dusting, meditating; but at some moments, trails of footsteps caught his ear. He called out to whoever he heard, but only the echoes returned his callings. He nodded with contempt, that he truly had found the place to begin his passage to nirvana.

Years have passed, and his body was never found. Monks all across Asia have heard tales about this sacred temple, but not one of them had the courage to take the path to seek such a place. Until one day, a monk wanders off to leave all that is worldly behind, and finds himself at the foot of the same mountain. He spends his time painting pictures of what he's been taught, and so does the next monk who comes after him. With the widespread canvases painted thoroughly to each corner and edge, the monks dig one cave after another, leaving us with the prized historical monuments we value to this date.

The Thousand-Year-Old Cave

Hong Kong Baptist University Affiliated School Wong Kam Fai Secondary and Primary School,

Lee, Ching Yu Rachel – 15

I travel around the world to discover never to be seen cultural relics for a living, which is something no other ordinary people can accomplish. It's just a career everyone wished they could pursue since the first day of their life. I get this necklace every time before I leave for a search, and we're told to activate it when we find an undiscovered relic. After that, we get paid thousands, which is one of the reasons for the luxurious lives some explorers are currently living. Similarly, my life has also completely changed like them now, and it all started with a cave I found in the southeast of Dunhuang oasis.

That day, my team and I were walking along the Silk Road hoping to find some undiscovered relics. Unfortunately, we were in blazing hot weather only surrounded by trees and a pond. With some more traveling, we found a reddish-brown structure ahead of us. It was carved into the cliffs above the Dachuan River, and it's a couple of stories tall. The first thing that caught our eyes when we got in was a lot of odd symbols on the walls, as well as up to thousands of sculptures and paintings in this cavern. I was honestly fascinated by the details of every artwork, and I just couldn't imagine how long it took for people in the past to create these. However, after going through the hundreds of caverns, we sadly still couldn't figure out what the artworks meant. On the bright side, we finally made it to the last cave. In fact, it was rather unique. There was a Buddha in the far end of the room, sitting in a meditating position.

A ruby on the Buddha's head shone across the room which caught my attention. As I walked closer and close to check out the ruby, I wanted to take it for further investigations on this place. A minute later, I decided to put a brave face on and snatched off the ruby from the Buddha's head. The ruby lifted off of my hands all of a sudden, and it dropped onto the ground. There was a loud thump out of nowhere, then all of my teammates looked at me in the corner of their eyes. A bright white light appeared behind the Buddha, behind the lights was a man with wrinkles on his face and white hair all over his head showed up. He stood there in silence, and so did we, I was petrified.

The man raised his hands, and everything started shaking. As we see artworks and sculptures getting closer to falling apart, we decided to flee this place. Some sculptures were cracking from the intense shaking when we were sprinting to the exit. Stalactites dangling from the ceiling of the caverns started to fall, gradually everyone started panicking. Some were left behind, and some were dashing towards the exit for their lives. Boom! Stalactites fell on the ground in a straight line, fully blocking the exit. I'm trapped. Everything finally stopped shaking, and the cave was a hot mess. As I looked around, I couldn't believe my eyes. The stalactites fell on everyone else, and I'm alone. Now I'll have to continue on this adventure on my own, my heart dropped.

At the far end of the cave, it was that same man. He started to speak, "More than one and a half millennia ago, a monk decided there was something special about this cave. Over the centuries, thousands of pilgrims arrived and decided to stay here, digging more caves and spending their time on creating sacred art and literature. While others decided to move on to other places, I decided to stay and make this place home. I'll bump into travelers around the world every now and then, however, they started to take other routes as time passed, and this cave was forgotten ever since. From then on, I was living in this cave alone, and I've never seen a human since then until now."

I was amazed when I heard what he said, so I questioned, "How did you manage to live till now?" He replied, "I've spent my life making a concoction that keeps me alive forever, so why are you here and what's that on your neck?" I explained, "Oh, I'm here to discover relics that have never been seen before, and this necklace on my neck...it's nothing..."

He asked me what it was again, I replied, "Well, it's a necklace and when I activate it, my company will send professionals here to move everything away so that they can sell bits of it for millions of dollars." As my hands got closer to the necklace, the man got on his knees and started begging me. "Please don't activate this, I have been living here for thousands of years, and all of these relics bear exceptional witness to the civilizations of ancient

China during the Sui, Tang, and Song dynasties. Other than that, there'll no longer be a place for me to live in. Just please don't activate your necklace."

It was tough to decide, if I activated the necklace, I would get to live a luxurious life, but then the man will have to suffer. After hours of thinking, I finally agreed on not activating the necklace, allowing the man to live peacefully for the rest of his life. I threw the necklace towards a stalactite, and it broke into pieces. After that, it felt like I have accomplished something new in life. To see the smile on the man's face, I was glad that I didn't activate the necklace.

Boom! We both looked at each other in distress, and when we looked up, there were multiple flashing lights from far. Seconds after, we sprinted into the hidden cave the man lives in. I peeked into a narrow hole on the wall, and it was the professionals from my company. I was freaking out, owing to the fact that I promised the man to not activate the necklace, but now the professionals are here and I've no clue why.

At this point I couldn't take it anymore, I told myself it's now or never. I confronted the professionals, and I explained as hard as I could to convince them to keep this place as it was. I said, "All of these artworks bear exceptional witness to the civilizations of ancient China during the Sui, Tang, and Song dynasties. As important, there's a man who's thousands of years old living in this cage. If we don't stop, this man will lose everything he has now. Also, how are you guys here?" They questioned, "Where's your necklace?", and I was speechless. Apparently, the professionals will also come when the necklace breaks down or was destroyed. Anyway, the crew finally thought it'd make sense to just leave this cave as it was with a lot of convincing, and I was delighted to break the news to the man.

I rushed to the hidden cave the man was hiding in, sadly it was too late. The man was found dead on the ground, and I started bawling my eyes out. Turns out the professionals were spraying preservatives all around the cave, and it deactivated the concoction the man took to keep him alive. I was praying for this to be my worst nightmare, but it wasn't.

Now I'm the only one who knows the history behind this cave, and it's up to me to tell everyone stories about this cave. As soon as I returned to the city, stories about this cave have spread everywhere, and from now on, I decided to name this cave The Mogao Caves.

A Mural in Red

Hong Kong Baptist University Affiliated School Wong Kam Fai Secondary and Primary School,

So, Man Suen Michelle – 15

[Part 1]

Every step I take echoes through the empty room. I take my torch and raise it high over my head as I walk towards the center of the room, observing the faded colours of the murals filling the wall. Paintings of orderly soldiers and workers in the fields adorn the walls with long-winding history, depicting stories of a mundane everyday life that became the past. A little painting of a farmer selling crops in the marketplace catches my eye. Decades of time, etched upon the walls of the Mogao Grottoes, preserving time in the form of art.

I run my fingers over the uneven walls, leaving chalky paint residue on my fingers. My fingers catch onto a strange groove hidden under the black charcoal marks of a strangely drawn symbol.

A gust of wind extinguishes my torch, leaving me in pitch black darkness. It sends shivers down the spine of my back, like something sinister that shouldn't be trifled with.

Where did the wind come from? I shut the door when I came in.

Cold sweat covers my back and I scramble to get the box of matches from my backpack. I strike a match and light my torch again, but the uneasy feeling in the bottom of my stomach stays like heavy rocks in the bottom of a pond. I face the walls with the intention of inspecting them once again.

The feeling of being faced with the same scene with the smallest differences gives you the strangest uneasiness. It's the uncertainty of seeing your memories are wrong and fake, even if you saw the exact scene moments ago. I force myself to ignore the uncertainty and observe my surroundings more carefully.

The colours seem... more vivid than what I remember from only minutes ago. The mural of a farmer that caught my eye is gone, leaving a blank wall in its place. As I look forward, there appear to be more and more patches of blank wall, unlike the walls completely filled with faded murals before.

Everything around me looks the same and different at the time. The small details, the vividness of the painting, the roughness of the walls, all of them seemed to be too vivid, too rough, and yet was the same all around.

In my state of confusion, from the innermost part of the grotto, a strange sickly smell reaches my nose.

[Part 2]

The disgustingly sweet smell of musk makes the air of the inner room feel heavy and choking. It sits in the air like a heavy layer of fog, distorting my sense of smell.

A statue of the Buddha sits in the middle of the room. Its features are faintly carved upon stone, lacking the full depth of a finished statue. The statue's eyes seem to be following me around, despite being unfinished. Freckles of red paint scatter across the floor, seemingly the aftereffects of painting the walls.

A figure dressed as a monk sits at the foot of the statue. His robes and fingers are covered with paint. In his hands are copper tools, stained with rust. He looks up upon noticing me, and smiles at me with a lopsided grin, teeth bared. As he moves to get up, a tiny tinkling of metal sounds from his satchel by his side. He says, "Oh? I have not seen a traveller since last month. What brings you to these caves?"

Caught off guard by his question, I say, "Ah, uh. I'm not, uh, a traveller. I'm like, lost I think?"

"That is quite a particular way of speaking. If you are lost, feel free to spend the night and depart in daylight." He faces me, smiling rather unsettlingly.

The heavy smell of musk fills my senses, making me feel rather drowsy and tired. Determined to stay awake in a strange situation, I prop myself up next to the wall.

Time passes and he paints on the wall, using the red paint smeared on his fingers.

He tries to make a light conversation with me, commenting on precious metals and spices he saw other travellers trading by the grottoes.

Tales of faraway lands, stories of newfound friends and enemies, legends and folktales of adventure cross my mind.

"Have you ever had the meat and alcohol traded by the Silk Road? It is a divine treat for the stomach." He laughs, holding his stomach, "Why, how much I wish I could have some now!"

"Yeah, that sounds pretty good right now." I answer, smiling slightly at the idea of some good food.

A strange feeling of unease hits me.

Any sort of food obtained by killing and alcoholic beverages are taboo for monks.

The sense of fatigue I had since entering the inner parts of the grottoes.

The red specks on the floor.

The clink of metal from his satchel.

I raise my head, looking at him through half-lidded eyes traced with disgust, and say, "You're not a monk, you're a thief. You've been robbing the people trading by the Mogao Grottoes. You're luring them to sleep by incense then robbing them blind."

His face twists into the most unearthly smile I have ever had the horror of seeing. I stagger towards the exit, heading for the outer rooms, to get away from this man, away from this place. I lean on the wall for support, smudging the paintings on the wall.

He mouths a simple phrase at me.

"Good night."

A new painting in red joins the murals on the wall.

The Scattered Writings of a Forgotten God

Korean International School, Cheung, Ming Lok – 14

This day and age, people had pondered and thought that there were beings, high above, lurking within the realms of The Good, The Sinful, the ones before us had used those thoughts and those supposed beings to raise hope, spread their ideologies. We as people have seen writings and inscriptions about those forsaken gods and goddesses, and we have thought that they were the only ones to lurk above. However, multiple explorers, hopping on the bandwagon of the archeological trend which were the caves within the Mogao Grottoes, soon find themselves discovering a millennia of lost scripture, an entire religion and ideology, hidden behind stone.

It was a breathtaking summer in the midst of 1915, archeologists from all around the world would have come to the Mogao Grottoes in search of loot and bountiful historical treasures. Many caves had already been rummaged through and stripped of its internals, except for one, hidden deep within the rocky cliff sides. One particular exploration team all the way from Britain was here, they were hoping to bring back a gleaming golden statue, maybe of an ancient Chinese warrior, or an antique souvenir to display within Britain's highest of museums. 4 men, Clarkson, Timmy, Jackson and Butch, would be the ones to find something else, equally astonishing and if not, more important to the future, of humanity.

Today was the day for the explorers to gear up and leave their camps to start adventuring. "Come on now lads! Today's the day, I can just smell it in the air, the breeze is mild and the smell of my sweat can tell it all!" Cried the ecstatic Timmy Evans, eager and unwilling to leave any treasures for anyone else but him to find. "Wouldya shut up already Timmy? I am so sick of you and your ramblings! we ain't never gonna find no treasure, nor any historical artefacts in that big rock, y'know, maybe we should've gone on an expedition to Egypt, at least the treasure there is marked by a big pyramid." Clarkson Smith grumpily replied, he was hungry, deprived of sleep, and hated the wilderness. "Well then why are you even with us then? To be frank... our expedition team isn't all that dazzling in advertising..." Replied Timmy. "I only joined because I thought we'd be getting' good loot, FAST. Not hangin' around, birdwatching or eating stinking canned dog food." Jackson added onto Clarkson's rant, quickly stating "Yeah Timmy, it doesn't seem like we're gonna get anything from those caves, maybe we should just pack up and head back, b-b-besides... The caves are pretty dark... and might be full of monsters, or whatever sort of ancient creature who would love to eat our brains." The timid Jackson would quickly shut his mouth, his last word barely making any sound, during the expedition, Jackson was terrified of the dark, and especially cramped tight caves. "Look, come on, at least have SOME hope left in ya, you know you two would hate yourselves if you realised we were leaving out on money and spoils. We just have to keep digging through those Grottoes, Britain's gonna pay us big time." Replied the opportunistic Butch, he was also here for the money, but was a lot more forgiving than Clarkson. Timmy joyfully exclaimed "Butch is right guys, come on! We can't let other explorers take our stuff!" The group now made their way towards the giant rocky cliffs that contained the treasure filled caves. "Fine, but I ain't workin' for another day, if we don't find anything in those stupid rock holes after we're done for today, I'm quitting!" Clarkson would state.

The group ventured forward with a spirit that was barely burning, but still hot enough for one last day of cave scavenging. The gang climbed and reached multiple cave dug outs, moving heavy stones and digging up century old rocks and gravel. They heaved away boulder after boulder, hoping to find even at least one speck of ancient pottery, but found nothing. They were about to make their way back, losing even more hope than they did yesterday and quite possibly quit exploring, and would finally abandon the trip. Until, Timmy would loudly shout "Guys! I found another one!" Clarkson, Jackson and even Butch were tired, having had enough of slaving away all day. "We ain't going to look through em anymore! I am too tired to do so! Besides, it's just more hope lost!" Blurted Clarkson, taking a breath every couple of words. "I-I-I am s-sick of all these caves! They're so dark and scary! And I can't breathe! I'm leaving!" Exclaimed Jackson, finally building up the courage to tell the group that he was done. "You know what guys? I'll go with Timmy, you two can go back down, but don't come crawling back to us when we find gold." Butch would speak up, telling Clarkson and Jackson to leave the area. Timmy, being so excited, would use all 4's to climb up, not even holding onto his harness rope anymore. "This one is way deeper than all the other ones!" Mumbled Timmy, trying to save his energy to climb. Butch was way too tired to have that kind of energy, and slowly came up, eventually reaching Timmy at the front of the cave.

The rocky and decrepit cave had etchings, semi-visible from all of the time that it has been there, eroding away. This cave entrance was completely different from every other one, the entrance would be blocked off by an excessive

amount of rocks, the writings on the wall looked like it had been written by almost a group of people at once, the writing and all of the symbolism must've meant something. Timmy and Butch started to dig up the rocks that barricaded the way in. Slowly revealing the dark insides of this mysterious dug out. "Geez, someone must've really NOT wanted people to get into this cave.... Oh well, they're probably dead now!". Once within the cavity, the two lit their torches, illuminating the small and dry room, the walls being completely desolate of any moisture and would almost crumble to the touch, shut off from the outside world by the rock blockage. It was a dome like structure, and when they shined their torches to the walls, they found old and shallow colourings, writings, beautiful chinese art pieces that describe some sort of being, and people. "What... is all of this Butch?" whispered Timmy, breaking the awkward silence. Butch slowly replied "I have no idea, it seems to be some sort of religion? Maybe a king of sorts?" "This ancient Chinese literature, I have no idea how to read it, maybe we can deduce what it is from the paintings." The two would ponder and try to conclude what this was, reading and interpreting every feature and detail of the artistic drawings, and after what seemed like an hour or so, finally came to a conclusion. The paintings on the wall, described an ancient god, descending upon the ancient Chinese pilgrims, and bestowed upon them sacred knowledge, knowledge about the future of all humanity, this information had to be shared, it was the only rule given by the great god. However the pilgrims could not effectively spread this information about the world as they know it, being so cut off from civilization, the god had known this, and expected much in humanity for the god had thought the pilgrims would reach more people, and in their last attempt to immortalize their findings. They inscribed hundreds of writings, scattered across the Grottoes, all encrypted, and all out of order, so that only the most worthy and most noble can discover them. Those relics were nothing when compared to this, potentially world changing information. Timmy and Butch stared at each other, wondering if this was all just a crazed cult, until they discover numbers on the wall, a line of 4 digit codes. 1912, 1914, 1915... all the way to 2020. Each of these digits, or years have a major event happening in them, possibly good, possibly bad. Timmy and Butch had known what happened in 1912, a ship called the Titanic had have sunk in 1912, one major event. They now knew that these aren't false, these scripture were fact, Timmy and Butch had to show this information to the world.

Butch and Timmy go back to the camp, ecstatic at what they have just found. "Guys! You WOULD NOT believe what me and Butch found! We found this cave and then this whole religion and then CRAZY GODS AND..." Timmy kept on rambling like an insane madman, jumping all around in an ecstatic fashion, moving his arms around. "Ahah.. sorry guys Timmy just got a little excited over a discovery.." Butch would add on, trying to calm down Timmy. "Aw hell, what? You found somethin' Well that's just Ironic innit." Clarkson would groan, realising his big mistake. "Well then, I guess it's gonna be me and Timmy who's getting that money." Butch would snicker. The group now packed up, with pieces of evidence of their sightings, they head back to Britain, hoping to achieve their goal of being recognized and becoming famous explorers.

Later on, the exploration group would show their findings to archeologists and skeptics all across the world, many would doubt their findings to be simple ramblings about another fake god, however, the group's proof and the ancient inscriptions which laid upon the walls speak differently, the undoubtable truth of the scripture baffled any skeptic. The writings prophesied events that no man could ever predict, things that would happen years after the discovery, and would still happen even if nobody would have discovered the writings. The group would be crowned kings of archeology, having discovered what might've been a true god, that cannot be answered with a simple scientific explanation. They are still known today for having predicted major events such as the Second World War, and the various viruses that plagued humans across centuries.

Faded and Forgotten

Maryknoll Convent School (Secondary Section), Chum, Anson – 16

Once I got off the shuttle bus, I knew something was off. The Mogao Grottoes was nothing like my mother had promised -- quiet, serene nor therapeutic. Boisterous chattering lingered in the air and echoed in my ears like thunder. Frowning, I turned around for my fiancé, who enveloped my numb hand in his.

It took us quite a while to navigate through the crowd to the entrance. With my fingers around my locket, I stepped into the famous caves.

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“Papa!” Six-year-old An cried, tears streaming down her red cheeks as she buried herself into her father’s embrace.

“They took my doll, Papa,” The little girl pointed an accusing finger at the group of older kids in the playground.

The father stared at the laughing older kids, and then at his sobbing little girl.

“It’s okay, good girl, Papa will get you a new doll,” he said, patting her back.

“But Papa, that’s **my** doll. I want it back,” she pouted.

“Look, An,” Her father grasped her shoulders. “You’ll have to learn to share your toys with others. Look how happy they are. It’s not important whose doll it is, the important thing is that everyone is happy.”

“I’m not happy.” An couldn’t understand. Shouldn’t her father, the almighty man who could protect her at all times, be standing out for her?

“I’ll get you a new doll,” her father sighed.

An lowered her head. “Okay.”

**

“My father would have loved this,” I muttered to my fiancé as we stared at a painting on the wall. The paint must have been so colourful back then. Time has taken the brightness and vibrancy out of it, but I could still catch glimpses of its past glory.

If only it had spoken of another story, I’d be able to join the others in applauding this masterpiece.

But I could not.

The fading colours intertwined to form a vivid picture of an ancient leader cutting meat off his thigh to feed the eagle. I could not comprehend the solemnity and ecstasy portrayed on his face. Could he not feel the pain of cutting into his own flesh? Could he not see his wives and concubines, weeping for his suffering and loss? Most of all, could he not see the senselessness and futility in stopping an eagle from savouring a single pigeon, at the price of wounding himself and even offering his whole body?

Camera clicks are everywhere around me. People rushed to this picture with their phones, trying to capture it and turn it into digital data in their devices, which will most likely get dust-ridden in forgotten corners of the database. I couldn’t help but find it peculiar, how not a single person among the huge crowd has taken notice of the ludicrousness of the story itself.

I turned around. My fiancé was taking a selfie. I grabbed his wrist and led him out of the suffocating crowd. Even though we are still surrounded by people, at least I wouldn’t have the illusion that I’m squeezing myself into a full bus to be on time for work on Monday mornings.

“What’s it, An?” My fiancé asked, his deep and soft voice always soothing.

“Nothing. It made me a little uncomfortable.” I managed to squeeze out a smile.

"I know," he smiled back. "I know how you hate the pathetic altruism it encourages, but it's just a story, my dear."

I let out a sigh. He stroked the back of my hand, as if patting an irritated cat, combing the tangled fur in one direction.

"You know what? I think I'll head to the other caves. Go on with your selfie."

"An..."

"Please, I just want to spend some time alone before we leave this place. I might even find out why Papa was so obsessed with this, who knows?" I chuckled weirdly.

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18-year-old An stood beside her father, the sombre expression out of place on her childlike face, and her plain black dress draining the colour from her pale skin.

Guests came and went. Their words of pity and compassion flew like feathers in the air and landed on An, not even causing a ripple in her heart. She could see the indifference in their eyes, and yet she had to smile and thank them for their "comforting words".

"Brother," A pair of leather shoes came into sight when An was staring at the tips of her own shoes. She looked up. The middle-aged man grinned at her father, showing his yellow, crooked teeth. "It's been a long time since we've met."

He then looked at An, as if just noticing her existence. "Look at my dearest niece! An, you've certainly grown a lot, haven't you? I could still remember how I carried you once after you were born."

An couldn't recall the last time she had seen her uncle. The only impression she had of him was her grandfather telling her stories of how her uncle and her father had grown up together years ago.

"Look, An. This is your uncle and your father when they were young," Her grandfather had said as he brushed an old photo with his fingers.

"Where is he, then? I've never seen him," An had asked.

"He's in England, An. That's far, far away."

"Why doesn't he come back then?"

An could still remember the way that her grandfather sighed, rocking his armchair back and forth. An didn't get the answer to her question that day, and she never asked again.

And now, the old man lay cold and stiff in his coffin, his eyes tightly shut, unable to see his youngest son return.

An's uncle continued talking. An could not hear what he was muttering to her father, but she could see his smile.

It was only a month later when An knew from her father that her uncle had taken her grandfather's old house and sold it.

"Papa, how could he..."

"An, he is your uncle." Her father said. The grey streaks in his hair suddenly came into An's sight. "He is your grandfather's son, and this is what he deserves."

"But he hasn't done anything, not at all. Where was he when Grandpa was sick and we were looking after him? He didn't even bother to pay his own father a visit all these years!"

"It's just a house. Don't make a big deal out of this."

An didn't know what to say. Her father was always like that, sacrificing himself for the happiness of others. She knew how important the house was to her father. It was the place where he spent most of his childhood in, the place which carried all his memories. She didn't understand -- what is the meaning of putting himself in the last priority, while other people merely take advantage of his benignity?

She recalled how her father had asked her to stay quiet and forgive those who had bullied her in school when she was eight. His words rung in her ears.

"You have to be kind," he said. "You have to be kind."

His voice echoed and An instantly felt as if there was something grasping her throat. She struggled for air, and for her life.

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I went on, after parting with my fiancé, from room to room, painting to painting. None of them seemed to bring me peace, or calm me down. I fidgeted with my locket as I grew more and more impatient.

"Miss, are you looking for something? You seem quite frustrated."

A young monk was looking at me with his buddha beads in his hand.

"No, I'm fine, thanks." I managed a smile.

"Well, if you are struggling with any issues, I can help."

"No, you don't understand. You should probably go help other people," I sighed, trying my best not to look annoyed at all.

"Let me see, are you thinking of a dear one, a deceased family member, perhaps?" he smiled.

"Wait... How do you know that?" I frowned.

"Your locket, Miss. You've been touching it quite often," he pointed out.

"Oh."

"Is there something that you can't get over with, related to that beloved family member?" he continued. "Something that you disliked about them, and yet had no chance to ever tell them before they left. You can't help but loathe them for it, yet there is nothing you can do about it, is that the reason for your frustration?"

I nodded slowly.

"Well, the answer is in your heart, miss. Ask yourself, why do you still care about this, even after they are buried six feet under? Why does it matter at all?"

I bit my lower lip and stared at my shoes.

"Because... I love him?"

I looked up and said, still unsure, but the monk was nowhere to be seen among the crowds.

Turning around to look at him, I found my fiancé walking towards me.

"What happened? You look like you're looking for something," he asked. "Are you still upset?"

I paused for a moment, and then beamed. "No, I've found what I was looking for."

"You know what, I just saw a monk, and..." I started telling him about my conversation with the monk as I slipped my hand in his.

"Oh really? I don't think there are monks here, though."

My mind went blank for a moment, and then I noticed a smiling figure on the wall, its colours so vibrant as if it was freshly painted.

I smiled. With my hand in my fiancé's, and my locket necklace around my neck, we walked into the crowd.

New Tales of the Mogao Grottoes

Maryknoll Convent School (Secondary Section), Lau, Leanne – 15

'I... I don't know if I can walk any further, Jiang.'

"The oasis is right up ahead, Lu! Come on, you can do it. We've come so far!" The man known as Jiang encouraged the panting man behind him. With one arm outstretched to his partner, Jiang gave a look of determination and hope, to which Lu reluctantly grabbed said arm and marched on.

The two men were some of the most renowned explorers and archaeologists in the 1900s. They were famed for their travels across the globe, in search of treasure and artifacts that were once lost to the natural world. Their latest adventure brought them back to their native China, this time on the Silk Road. Unfortunately, they forgot that a major part of the Silk Road was a vast sea of sand. Now here they are, trekking through one of the many deserts of northern China. "How do we know for sure that it's not another mirage?"

"Well, we're getting closer, aren't we? It's practically in front of us!" Jiang exclaimed to his rather skeptical partner. One can easily distinguish between the two just by their tone and manner of speech. Jiang was obviously the positive one.

In a matter of minutes, the two stood before the oasis, marveling at the greenery of the foliage. It was practically heaven compared to the hellish heat of the bone-dry desert. Lu was overjoyed at the sight of fresh water, already crouching down and drinking it as Jiang, always the adventurer, scaled the perimeter. The oasis was far bigger than he imagined, but it wasn't nearly as mindblowing as what he saw next.

'Lu! Lu! You've got to see this!' Jiang yelled excitedly as he sprinted back to his partner. Before Lu could even react, Jiang already pulled him up and dragged him away from the pristine lagoon.

'What do you want, Jiang? I was just getting to- Woah...'

Before he could finish telling him off, Lu trailed off as he gazed up at the gargantuan cavern towering above him. It was nothing like the men had ever seen, and that's saying a lot since they've seen way more than the average man does in a lifetime. An archway of rocks and stalactites marked the entrance to the grotto. Golden sand fell from the ceiling, glistening in the sunlight.

"What the..."

"I know, right? I wonder what this place is-"

"The Mogao Grottoes. I-I can't believe the legend is real..." Lu exclaimed as he brushed his palm against the slightly crumbling walls of the grotto

"What legend?"

"The legend of the grottoes. Thousands of years ago a monk first discovered this very cave. After that, legends began to circulate about a treasure hidden here. Decades passed as older generations of explorers came and dug more caves, hoping to find the treasure, but to no avail. They lost hope, and this place became deserted, lost in time. I can't believe we found them again!"

"Well, if it's so great, let's go in already!"

For once, Lu didn't object to Jiang's request, gladly following him towards yet another breakthrough in their careers. However, despite the strong feelings of hope in their hearts, things quickly took a turn. They found themselves lost in what seemed like a labyrinth of tunnels that went absolutely nowhere. One would think that as professional explorers, they wouldn't make such a rookie mistake. But they were so riled up with excitement that they forgot to bring any form of navigation tools with them. All they had were their flashlights, food rations, a pitcher of water each, as well as each other.

"Okay, so we're clearly lost here. What do we do?"

"Come on, Lu, don't be discouraged just yet," began an enthusiastic Jiang as he began to step forward. "We have all the time in the- Ah!"

Jiang's little pep talk was put to a halt as he suddenly disappeared with a shout. A rumbling sound could be heard as well

"Jiang? Jiang?! Talk to me!"

"I'm alright! Look down here!" Jiang's voice echoed through the walls. Lu indeed looked down at where Jiang was last standing, to find him waving from a large hole in the cavern floor. He jumped down to reunite with his partner, only to find him frozen in shock and awe.

"Jiang? Mate, what are you looking at?" He looked in the direction Jiang was gazing at, and soon enough he found himself doing the same. For in front of them was another cave. And not just any cave, but a cave filled to the brim with scrolls and stacks of old, yellowed paper. Faded paintings and tapestries hung lopsided and torn on the stony walls. Broken vases and the severed heads of sculptures were scattered across the cave floor, dirtied by the sand. At the center was an enormous statue. A statue of what? They weren't sure. It was covered in sand and the statue's body parts were missing.

"... well, partner, looks like we hit the jackpot, eh?" Jiang was the first to speak when the duo finally came to their senses. He gave his partner a nudge before immersing himself in the pile of newfound relics.

"This is even better than I imagined..." Lu whispered to himself as he began to look around. He began to flip through the scrolls and ancient books piled up against the cave. Intricate sketches and blurry words of Buddhist teachings filled up every corner of the pages. As he reached for another book, however, the pile collapsed onto Lu. He was lucky it was just paper and not something heavy.

"You okay there?"

"Yeah, yeah." Lu dismissively waved to address his partner. But he paid no attention whatsoever and was instead drawn to a particular book, its cover shimmering in the tiny ray of sunshine that managed to peek through the cave walls. It lay on a rickety old wooden book stand that was covered in cobwebs and age-old dust. He wiped off the thick layer of sand atop the book to reveal the cover. Flipping through the pages, he found an array of unfamiliar symbols, as well as hundreds of Buddhist illustrations.

"What is that? It looks different from the other scrolls."

"I think it's more of a book..."

Lu lifted it up to examine it in the light, but as soon as the book left its spot, a creaking sound could be heard from beneath the wooden stand. The walls suddenly shook, and the men followed the creaking sound towards the centerpiece statue, which abruptly fell from its upright position against the wall and began tumbling towards the two men, both of whom quickly took it as a sign to run for their lives. With the book still in Lu's arms, the rolling statue chased them from the cave of scrolls all the way back to the labyrinth of tunnels and back to the outside of the cave. All through that process, the men wondered how a statue could gather enough momentum to roll across a cave as deep as that one, but as soon as it came into contact with the overwhelming rays of sunlight, its movement came to a halt and just lay there on the rich dirt of the oasis.

"What... in the world... was that?" Jiang asked, panting heavily.

"It must've been some sort of elaborate trap the monks built to keep intruders at bay and protect the book. So whatever's in this thing, it's pretty important. Why else would ancient monks want to keep it there so badly?"

"That's great and all, but how are we going to go back?"

"This statue over here was a great help, actually. Its rapid rolling helped mark a path on the dirt. Following it will lead us directly back to the cave. Plus, this time we can grab our gear!"

And just as they planned, the duo, this time fully equipped, was able to navigate the deep, dark grottoes and return to their biggest discovery of the day.

“... And that’s how we found the Mogao Grottoes, as well its treasure trove of ancient literature and art, which we hereby name the ‘Library Cave’. We believe the finding of this cave will prove significant to all aspects of Buddhism.” Jiang announced on national television during a press conference a few months after their expedition.

“The book we unearthed during that time is now known as the Diamond Sutra, and we are honored to announce that this book is the oldest printed book in history,” Lu added

“Did you two face any particular challenges during this adventure?” a reporter asked.

“I don’t recall any big challenges. And even if there were, we probably didn’t even notice it. I guess we just *rolled* with it.” Jiang answered, giving a little chuckle at the clever joke he made. He looked over to his partner who, thankfully, was laughing too.

The Mystique of the Mogao Grottoes

Maryknoll Convent School (Secondary Section), Lee, Yan Yin Alicia – 16

‘Cling!’ The gong went. Its sound echoed, resembling the start of the annual Summer Festival in the village. Eagles soared in the cerulean sky and the breeze tickled the buoyant faces of little boys and girls. It’s a lively village I would say, full of hope and beauty.

“Su!” said Ma. “Get the dishes done as soon as possible. The first event starts in thirty minutes. We can’t miss it.”

“Ok,” I said. Washing the dishes has been a mundane task for me since I was eight years old. I didn’t really like it but I did it anyway. I was at home with Ma most of the time when my brothers went out for hunting trips. I never had the chance to explore the world for myself, but I guess that’s just part of life since I’m a girl.

‘Be grateful for what you have Su, a lot of girls out in China are still suffering from hunger. You’re one of the lucky ones.’ That’s Ma’s motto. Having a roof over my head, being able to get the food that I need, I’m happy about that but as I grew older, I realised that there’s something hidden from me. Something’s missing in my life. My pop. I have been trying hard to find more about him but nobody has ever told me anything. Ma once said that he was an archaeologist but nothing more.

Other than that, the village of Chengshi was wondrous, the symbolism of China’s nature. With kids dancing around and chanting songs. People had the freedom, almost every single bit of freedom to sing, to speak, to learn and to dance. But there was one thing that was forbidden among the people here.

The Mogao Grottoes.

It was banned in our little village. We could not call out its name.

“Rumour has it that if you speak of the devil’s name, it will come after you. I remember once a villager who called out the devil’s name vanished and was nowhere to be found.” Yang, my cousin told me. “His family members caught a disease and died one after another.”

I didn’t really believe in such superstitions. How could a cave bring harm to villagers? It’s literally complete nonsense. But I never questioned the villagers about it, especially because it’s our annual festival today. I didn’t want to ruin this special day.

*“Our village is so beautiful
Where the lives of people are delightful.
We gather here to celebrate the annual Summer festival.
Children chant and adults cheer
But we do not speak of the cave’s name
Shush shush shush shush
We do not speak of the devil’s name.”*

This was the song of our ritual. I had been singing and dancing to it for 16 years.

“Mogao Grottoes! Mogao Grottoes! Stop this! I’ve had it!” Hang, a teenage boy said, rushing into the crowd. “It’s just the name of a cave. Why don’t I have the freedom to say it? Why don’t children here get to know about Mogao Grottoes? Don’t you ever realise that sometimes you’re just overwhelmed by rumours and you don’t realise you’re living a lie all along. Mogao Grottoes is not what...”

Without even letting Hang finish his sentence. Mr.Chang, the village leader, pushed Hang to the ground. “Don’t you dare say the forbidden words!” The crowd stopped singing and dancing.

Suddenly the crowd whispered to one another. Their blissful faces immediately turned into a frown. Their menacing glares were intimidating and they stared at Hang.

“Listen to me! This isn’t right! We should have stopped this ritual long ago. This has done nothing but harm to the village.” Hang protested.

“Women and children go back to your homes right now. We are about to start!”

The men in the village are like people with white nightgowns, soulless and haunting the whole place. They formed a circle. Hand in hand, they walked around Hang.

“Ma, what’s going on?” I asked.

“Don’t look Su, it’s not allowed for women and children to witness this sacred ceremony.” Ma said, dragging me home.

In these 16 years of my life, never had I ever seen or heard about this ceremony. It’s time for me to see it for myself. I pushed Ma away from me. She let go of her grip and fell to the ground. I ran as fast as I could. I needed to see what’s going on.

“DON’T DO THIS TO ME!” I heard a scream from afar. The voice echoed in my ears just as how the sound of the gong echoed throughout the village.

Quickly, I rushed towards the direction where Hang was located.

“Hang! Hang!” I yelled. “Where are you?” Suddenly, for the very first time, I spotted something frightening, something ridiculous, something violent. I hid behind a pillar in order to avoid being spotted by anyone.

Hang cried in fear, with both his hands over his head. He fidgeted through the suffocating crowd and tried to escape. I could see blood trickling down his naked body. I could feel his pain. His innocent eyes were full of sadness and sorrow. The men didn’t around Hang didn’t bother to care for him and they continued their ceremony.

As a witness, I covered my mouth, horrified by the situation Hang was in. I wanted to stop it but I knew I wouldn’t be able to fight a pack of wolves. I just watched in silence. The more Hang protested and fought back, the more brutal the men were.

Feeling helpless and weak, Hang used his last breath and shouted with all his might. “You are going to regret this! I’m trying to warn you about something! Karma will come for you all some day.” Hang fell down to the ground.

“We do not call out its name. We do not call out its name. We do not call out its name.” The men chanted as if they were possessed by some spirit, leaving the unconscious Hang lying on the floor. My lovely memories that took years to build were completely shattered by this ritual. Village Chengshi was not the village that I loved and adored. It was a place where secrets were hidden. A place where superstitions top over everything. The group of villagers circled around Hang. “He’s dead everyone.” One said. They slowly left the circle and went back to their respective homes as if nothing had happened.

I could feel my body trembling with fear. This couldn’t be the truth. I knelt to the ground, covered my face and cried. Disgusted yet desperate, I felt helpless. Hang didn’t deserve all of this.

“Su...Su...Su...” A voice said behind. I turned around. It was Ma, sweaty and exhausted. “Have you heard the saying that curiosity kills the cat? I told you not to intervene! This is a sacred ritual only for the men, not for women!”

“This is not a sacred ritual, Ma!” I wailed. “Hang doesn’t deserve any of this. People have been blinded by the legend of the caves that they don’t even realise what they’re doing is preposterous!”

Ma raised her hand and struck me. "How dare you question the ritual! Don't ever say that again! You're not the conformable girl I used to know."

"Well you're not the sympathetic and generous woman I used to know, Ma!" I retaliated.

"Su! Get out! Out of the village! I don't want to see you again! You have profaned the ritual our ancestors have set for us."

"What, Ma! I'm your daughter! Ma!" Ma didn't bother to look at me. She just used all her might to drag me out of the village and I reluctantly lagged behind her. I kicked as hard as I ever could and screamed at the top of my lungs.

"You can't do that Ma. You are not at liberty to do this!" Ma didn't respond. She kept dragging me towards the exit of our village. I could see children in the houses looking at me sceptically.

Ma threw me out of the village and slammed the door shut. I wasn't prepared for all of this.

I sat outside the village door, all alone. The vivid image of Hang's death repeatedly appeared in my head. The overwhelming grief and guilt I had in me was just unbearable. Hang died in front of me and I had done nothing but to let him die on his own. I didn't understand why the villagers needed to do that. It's definitely not necessary.

I kicked the village door with my legs, hoping that someone would just open it and let me in. But there wasn't any response. Again I burst into tears. I got up and walked away from my so-called home for the very first time in 16 years. I strolled down the little paths of the forest and eventually I went deeper into the woods without even noticing.

"You minion!" A Bengal white tiger reached out its claws and tried to attack me. I was petrified to see tigers coming near me. I was even more surprised to hear a tiger speaking to me.

"Please don't do that to me. I'm just wandering about. I don't mean to cause harm." I said, praying to myself that this was nothing but a dream.

"You liar! You want us to let you go after all the things you have done to us? Today I'm going to eat you alive until the flesh of your body turns into bones and pieces! Brothers attack!" Five Bengal white tigers ran towards me. Their sharp claws were like weapons.

"STOP THIS BOYS! HAVEN'T I TAUGHT YOU ABOUT MANNERS?" A young man with white moustache suddenly appeared out of nowhere.

"But Master Fu, she might be an intruder!" One of the tigers said.

"Relax boys. She's just a girl. She can't do any harm." This man took me by the hand and lifted me up. "Greetings and sorry for my friends' manners. My name is Master Fu and I'm the leader of this forest. These tigers are my buddies. So what's your name and why are you here? "

"I'm Su and I'm just a girl wandering about the forest. Sadly, I got kicked out of my village and had nowhere to go."

"Wait. Don't tell me you're from Village Chengshi."

"I am, why?"

"Is your full name Chan Su?"

"Um yes."

"Oh god." Master Fu was appalled. "You're the daughter of Chan Ming. What an honour! Ming was the best archaeologist that I've ever seen. He lived in Village Chengshi and I remembered clearly that he had done a lot of

research on mountains and caves, including the Mogao Grottoes. I've been there many times and there was a lot of sacred art and literature..."

"The Mogao Grottoes! We're not allowed to talk about this in our village. People just hated this cave for no reason. And by the way do you know anything about my father, I haven't received much information about him." I said.

Master Fu wasn't really happy about this. He sighed. He started explaining the reason why the tigers were so aggressive in the first place and why he asked me about my name and everything. Mongo Grottoes was a mysterious cave which had protected animals from danger and in the centre of the cave lies a sparkling crystal. He said that there was once a person who stole an Emerald crystal from the Mogao Grottoes. Master Fu and my father were there to halt the thief but unfortunately my father didn't make it. Worse still, with the jewel gone, the animals living near the caves started to get weaker and a lot of them fell into a deep sleep. Thus, in order to save Mogao Grottoes and the animals, the jewel must be retrieved and put to where it originally belonged.

Witnessing the death of Hang and knowing that my father had left the world, I was extremely upset. The truth hurts but I guess the destiny of the forest lies in my hands.

"Bring me to the Mogao Grottoes, Master Fu!" I said.

For the first time in my life, I finally had the chance to explore the world for myself. I was high up in the mountains, looking over the panoramic view of Gansu Province. I could taste the feeling of freedom.

Master Fu brought me to the Mogao caves at last. The view was breathtaking yet the inside of the cave looked mysterious and perilous. Led by Master Fu, I slowly followed his footsteps and went inside the cave.

"These drawings on the walls are the sacred arts and literature drawn and written by some ancestors and foreigners back in the old days. And this statue in front of you is the sacred Buddha of the cave. It's Ming's favourite piece of art. The jewel was supposed to be placed on its head."

"Did my father say anything before his passing?" I asked.

"He said that he recognized the thief and he wrote something down."

Master Fu directed me towards the wall where my father wrote his last words.

"I never knew what this word meant."

I observed the word Dad wrote. It wasn't really clear though but I could still see the remains of his blood stains. There's only one word and it says 'GNAHC'. I was baffled. I didn't know what it meant. Was this an initial? Or was this a clue?

Suddenly, I realised the truth. I realised that I knew who was behind this and I needed to do something about it.

It was night time. I tried to open the village door to see if it was locked or not. I was scared so I told Master Fu to accompany me. Suddenly, I heard footsteps coming towards the door. Quickly, Master Fu and I hid behind a bush. Seconds later, a dark figure opened the door. The person was holding a bag and was dragging it away from the village. Master Fu and I dared not make a sound. As the dark figure slowly moved away from us, both of us tip-toed and went inside the village.

"Now we need to go to the last house of the village." I whispered to Master Fu. "It's going to be risky so I hope we can make it." We walked through the small alleys of the village and most importantly we observed carefully, hoping not to be spotted by anyone.

“We’re here.” I said. “Better lower me down with a rope from the rooftop. The door is probably locked.” Master Fu took a rope from his bag and tied it to my waist. Steadily, he lowered me down.

I looked around the house, I could barely see anything. It was dark inside. Out of nowhere, something gleamed in the darkness. It was the colour of Emerald green. Without hesitation, I searched for the source of light.

“There!” I said. “Pull me up!” I held the emerald crystal tightly in my arms, not willing to let it go.

“Way to go Su, we made it.” Master Fu whispered. “Let’s go save the Mogao Caves.” Master Fu climbed down the rooftop and both of us slowly crept away from the house and towards the door.

“We’re almost there.”

“Hello there.” An eerie voice whispered. I felt a pat on the shoulder. I turned around to see a pair of green, evil eyes looking at me. I panicked but Master Fu held my hand to calm my nerves. Despite the evil eyes, I recognized the person. It’s Mr.Chang. “I haven’t seen you for a while. What are you doing in the middle of the night?” he asked. “Um, just wandering around.” Mr.Chang looked me up and down. His evil smile immediately turned into a menacing glare. He stood still and looked me in the eyes and whispered some uninterpretable words. Immediately, the villagers rose from their beds, switched on the lights and walked out of their doors. They stood beside Mr.Chang. Among the crowd, I saw my mother and brothers, standing lifelessly.

“It’s you! You killed my father!” I yelled.

“Well, child, I suggest you put the blame on your father. He’s the humble man who people adored. The great archaeologist! Nobody has ever cared for poor Mr.Chang’s feelings. With your father gone, I’m now the leader of this village and they’re all under the spell of the Emerald crystal of Mogao Grottoes. The people will pay for what they have done to me. Suffer under my rule!” Mr.Chang cackled.

“Oh no you won’t!” Master Fu said. Both of us ran towards the exit of the village.

“Attack!” The villagers who are my friends and family came crawling like a bunch of zombies.

Master Fu and I ran for our lives. It’s horrifying but I knew I was the only one who could save Mogao Grottoes ...

I panted yet I kept going. With the assistance of Master Fu’s tigers, it was much easier to head up the cave. “Don’t give up! You’re almost there!” Fu said. The villagers were so quick that some of them were already crawling towards us.. Master Fu tried to distract them but they were really strong. I made my way up the Buddha, hoping that I wouldn't fall down. I grabbed the hand of the Buddha and swung myself up to its head. With all my might, I plucked the jewel in its head. The Emerald crystal shimmered and shined and it ignited the darkness. The villagers stopped running. They looked normal again.

“I did it!” I cried with joy.

“You’re amazing,” said Master Fu. “The caves would not be saved if it wasn’t for you. You’re my heroine.” He gave me a kiss on the forehead and we spent the rest of the night, looking at the beautiful night sky up on Mogao Grottoes.

Hollow is the Echo within my Shattered Heart

Maryknoll Convent School (Secondary Section), So, Audrey – 15

Empty lays the space beside me, for the one hundredth night in a row.

It's been such a long time, brother. Why haven't you returned?

He said he'd be back in eighty-four moons, so we held an honorary feast for him that night, in celebration of his feats. Our entire family was here, hoping for his return. I mean, who wouldn't want to witness the return of a war hero, who had trod through mountain and sea, valley and cave, to bring glory for our country?

Under the bright moonlight, we anxiously anticipated his return. For a while, nothing was heard aside from the games of the children. Then, in the distance, the sound of slow trotting was sent into my ears, growing louder and louder as the figures of some men on horses appeared. I looked past our parent's shoulders, heart racing at an astronomical speed, fuelling up the smile growing on my face. I raised my arm to wave eagerly at the men, calling out my brother's name.

Normally, he'd wave back, yet there was no receiver to my greeting, only a few heads hung low. Perhaps he was tired, or maybe even shy to see so many of our family gathered together for him. He was always the shy one amongst all our siblings, even though he was the second oldest after me, and the only boy in our generation. He may not have been the man our father expected him to be, but this breakthrough he made to prove him wrong most certainly left us all proud, especially me. Ours will be a family of honour now.

Being too absorbed in my pride for my brother, I failed to notice that the horses had already arrived by the gates of our family home. I didn't see the way our parents' faces twisted as they searched frantically through the few horses for him. I missed the part where the men took off their helmets, lowering their heads in sync at our family. I never saw them retrieving a pile of blood-stained, tattered armour from a bag on a horse, handing it back to our parents. Only when the loud impact of a crash was heard, bowls shattering, pots clanging against the floor did the proudness I held dissipate, shattering with the fragments on the floor.

"Grandmother!"

Mother's voice shot out from the crowd of family members. Pushing away everyone, she dashed towards grandmother's body, lying on the floor amongst the shattered fragments. Placing two fingers at her nape, she leaned against grandmother's chest, eyes wide in fear.

"Lian, come over here and help me carry grandmother into the house!"

Only just having recovered from the sudden happenings around me, I stared mindlessly at my mother for a few seconds before registering her command. I mouthed a small "okay", preparing to make my way over.

"What do you mean my son is dead!?" My father exclaimed from behind me, and all seemed to stop at once, glueing my feet to the ground

My mother kept on calling for me, yet all her words seemed to muffle as the overwhelming sound of "dead" echoed throughout my ears, turning my body into paste. I turned around shakily, the scene of my father, eyes wide with disbelief, along with the rest of my family staring at the man at the gate came into my eyesight.

As I waddled my way over to my father, I heard my mother utter something along the lines of "useless daughter" as she called over my other sister to assist her. I stood unsteadily beside my father, my young sisters trailing after me.

"A cave collapsed, crushing a few of our men, sorry."

Everything after those words were said are all but faded to me now, yet it's all mashed into one gigantic ball of denial. My brother is a strong person, how could he have been crushed by a rockslide? He was just supposed to prove his worth to our father, not end up dead for it.

Days have gone by since we last heard of you, and in that time, grandmother has passed away as well, presumably from shock. Father and mother seem to have recovered quickly from the deaths of two of their loved ones, yet a strange, heightened sense of anger seems to radiate from them everyday.

Even now, thinking that my dear brother was dead is a pain. I know he's gone, but how could I believe that without having seen the corpse for myself? The words said by those men on that night tug on my heart constantly, violently pulling on it, as if alerting me of its strangeness. Something about their tone just never sat right with me, yet I could never directly put my finger on it.

He might've been erroneously pronounced dead, there must be a truth being concealed from us.

Yet when I bring this up with our parents, father would say I'm disillusioned, and mother would say I've been possessed by a demon. They want me to get married to a man who can provide for our family, now that the only young man in the family is dead.

How could they have gotten over that tragedy already? Does their not heart ache for the loss of a son, whom they have worked hard to raise over the years? All I want to know is the truth, do they not want to know the truth? They never brought his body back, so there must be a chance that he is still alive, no matter how slim it is.

I can't stand knowing that he may be out there, alone and abandoned by us. I can't stand knowing that my brother, if dead, is not buried honourably, and his corpse is just out there rotting in the wind, being eaten by horrid animals. And for this I need to find him- no, I must find him.

Silently slipping out of my bed, I caught a glimpse of my parents sleeping peacefully across the room, the youngest sisters huddled on their bed and the older ones on another bed. Careful not to make any noise, I quickly yet softly tiptoed out the bedroom, gently closing the door behind me. The cave they claimed my brother died in was just 2 hours away from home if I walk. It was somewhat long, but it didn't matter, all that did was the truth.

I ran along the path towards the cave, each thud of my footsteps bringing me closer to the truth. The night wind howls, sand and dirt blowing into my face. I recall running on the same path as a kid with my brother. Back then, life seemed much simpler, just two kids running to have fun in a cave.

Tears started to prick uncomfortably at the corners of my eyes, but there was nothing I could do about them aside from running towards the truth.

I hurriedly sprinted across the uneven roads, through sharp blades of grass and under long tree branches. My legs started to weaken from the wounds it sustained, especially as the cold night wind slashes bits of dirt and sand into them, but I could not stop, I had to make it to the cave they said he died in.

It's strange, I think to myself as I fall on my knees, gazing at the cave entrance in front me. Last time I came here was when I was a child, playing with my brother. Yet now I'm here, as a grown adult, trying to piece the truth of the death of my brother together.

Mogao Caves, it seems we meet again.

As soon as I could stand, I leaned against the cave walls and hobbled my way through the passages in the cave, lantern in hand. Nostalgia accompanied with tears flooded through my mind, as the scene of my childhood playground came into sight. Even now, after so many years, I can still feel the excitement my young self felt as she hid within passages, waiting for her brother to find her.

I can still recall the time we made bracelets out of cloth I stole from our mother, slipping them on each other's wrists, promising to never take them off. I pat my right wrist gently, feeling the shape of a bracelet on it. I held on to it tighter, in fear of losing more of him.

"Oh, that's still here." I muttered to myself, wiping away the blurriness in my eyes.

A painting on the wall, created by my brother and I years ago. Our parents stood smiling at the centre, with all of our siblings by their sides. It was a stupid tradition, coming here everytime father and mother had a new baby just to draw it on the wall, yet my brother persisted and now we're here.

"Lian, run faster," he would say. "We need to get back by sundown!"

"You run too fast, Liu!" I would reply while huffing like a dog in summer, "Why do you need to do that stupid tradition anyways, father and mother have children too much, can't you just wait till they finish having children before drawing them all at once?"

"The caves are fun, Lian, and this is the perfect excuse to come back to play!"

Everytime, after he'd drawn our newest addition to the family, we'd play for hours, running through the caves, trying to catch each other at every turn. Our laughter echoing endlessly throughout the hallway, only ceasing when we'd collapse to the ground, exhausted from the fun.

Usually, we'd end up getting home late, for time seemed to go faster when we were having fun. Father would reprimand us, but to us, the fun was worth the scolding.

Perhaps I shouldn't have complained so much when we went to the cave, or perhaps I should have ran faster on that journey. Maybe then I could have spent more time with my brother, maybe I would've treasured my time better then.

Wrapped up in my forgotten memories, I let my body wander off through the cave, moving about subconsciously. The cave around grew darker despite my lantern, and eventually I hit a dead end.

Hopeless about ever finding anything about my brother, I turned away from the cave wall to leave, yet when I took one step forward, the tip of my foot met something sharp. Directing the light from my lantern to the floor, I saw an unforgettable sight.

A pile of white powder-like dust, lying beneath a few shattered bones, laid out in the shape of a human body.

"Eek!" I squealed, stumbling backwards against the wall, away from the horrifying skeleton which laid before me. Why would a skeleton be here in the cave, especially one that is shattered...

My thoughts came to a halt, a dooming sense of realisation dawned upon me. Lips tightened and teeth clenched, I inched closer to the bones, kneeling down to find the missing key of any hint of identification for the corpse. Surrounding its left wrist was a simple cotton band, the same one I made for my brother in the caves years ago.

He'd never take it off... was this his end?

No, it can't be, it couldn't be. He was a noble man, how could he have suffered such a dishonourable end? I slammed the ground beneath me, peering into the darkness behind the skull's eyes, as if hoping for a response.

It's empty eye sockets stare back at me, drilling deeply into my disillusioned soul, dissolving all the doubt I had surrounding my brother's inevitable death. As reality sets within my slowly collapsing world, a repressed string of tears begin pouring out of my soul.

He can't be dead, but the evidence says otherwise. Still crying my heart out, I grasped the thin bones of what remains of my brother's hand, hoping to feel the same warmth I felt from them all those years ago, yet what appeared in his right hand was not warmth, but a single, crumpled sheet of yellow tinted paper, it's corners dry with dark coloured blood.

Recognising the penmanship on the paper, I frantically started to scan through every line closely, desperately hoping to reconnect with the dying spirit of my dearest sibling.

"Used as a scapegoat, I cannot believe it."

I thought we noble men of war were supposed to stick up for each other, protect each other like brothers, so why was I unanimously chosen to be everyone's scapegoat? Did they forget the importance of righteousness, in favour of wanting to survive? Was my life just a spare, an replaceable one at that? Or was it because I was in your way, protesting against sacrificing one of our brothers to the enemy for our safety, that you all decided to get rid of me?

Fair enough, I never meant much anyway.

I was always the shy one in my family, not manly enough to fit society's expectations. Unable to fend for myself and stand strong, I was always hiding behind someone, acting as a submissive follower, not one of leadership.

I have always been the failure of my family, so I knew I had to change.

This war we fought, I scrambled to sign up as a soldier. I thought that perhaps if I'd come out alive from it, I'll be considered a hero, one deserving of glory, and maybe then will my family finally acknowledge me and praise me for all I'm worth.

My family bearing wide smiles, happily welcoming me back into the warm, homily embrace of my home. My father patting me on the back, my mother wrapping me in a tight hug. All my young siblings cheering for me, Ah Lian telling me that I've grown. These scenes appear vividly before my sight, yet I suppose they will all remain a fantasy, now that I've practically been left to perish in this horrid cave.

It's funny, I used to call this cave my second home. Many precious childhood memories were birthed here, and now, it is the prison in which I will take my final breath. I would've loved to revisit the hallways Lian and I explored as children, maybe even catch a slight glimpse of our family painting, but I supposed that will never happen now, since my torturers crushed both of my legs.

It's strange, my legs might have been crushed and mauled into dust, my entire body might have been slashed relentlessly, yet all this suffering could barely compare to the pain in my heart. The disdain burning through my veins, repeatedly telling me that I'm worthless, that I've disappointed all of my family for letting myself be taken away by the enemy, essentially submitting to them.

Whatever, shut up. I'm going to die anyways, the thoughts of my family matter not to me now. They never cared when I was alive, why would they care if I died without bringing an inch of honour to them.

Ah, I suppose Lian would care though, she was there to raise me when our parents did not. My fondest memories were of her, of us just being children together. I've missed having such a supportive sibling behind me constantly.

I have no regrets, I've lived up to myself in my lifetime, and that's what's important. Yet I still wish I could've at least made Lian proud in my lifetime. Perhaps I already have, but with the person I was, I don't think I did.

Sorry, dear sister.

I—

A smudge of blood on the last sentence ends the letter, yet my tears do not cease, they only flood out harder at the unsaid thoughts behind the letter.

He has always made me proud, how could his perception of his own self be so warped from reality? He never needed to prove anything to me, all that I wanted was for us to be there for each other until the bitter end.

"What did he ever do to warrant this tragic end!?" I screamed between sobs, at the sky that I could not reach nor see. "Why did we treat him this badly!?"

Blurred splotches of red appeared before my eyesight, scenes of our childhood danced within my vision. I could see the way he smiled at me as we drew the last sibling on the wall. I could see the misery in his eyes when our parents called him profanities, saying he was "unmanly". I could hear my past self telling him that it was just the way of our

parents, never offering him true comfort and solace. I can now envision the betrayal of his brothers, who had fought together with him, their faces blank as a sheet as they sent a fellow comrade to their death. I can feel the pain my brother felt when his legs were crushed, not for the loss of his legs but for the honour he'll never bring to his family. I can understand the despair behind the crumpled paper in my hands, the betrayal eating him alive as he struggles to express his final thoughts.

We were all his betrayers, his murderers, whether we intended it or not.

I collapsed to the floor, flailing my arms around destructively, wanting the world to just shatter and fall upon me. But no matter how much I wish, the world around me will not stop, it continues to mock me as I lay shattered beside all that remains of my brother. Grasping the bones of his right hand, I turned to my side to face the death in front of me.

I can hear our child selves laughing at their games, lying down together in blissful exhaustion. Now, I hear my endless stream of sobs echoing through the room, us lying broken in despair.

Bloodstained is the hand that holds my brother's. In her unstable, mistaken mind, a killer she has become.

Tales of The Mogao Grottoes

Marymount Secondary School, Siu, Cheuk Monique – 12

Shanxi, the present

My name is Yunshang. My father died two weeks ago.

After Father had left things in my family changed. Although mum tried to hide how she felt, the expressions on her face didn't lie. My sister Ling acted like a toddler again and no-one seemed to sleep much.

What about me? I didn't want to think anymore of this. When I recall the death of my father, I feel too much has been taken away from me and I close up like a flower in the evening.

Uncle told me to take a break, bought me two tickets: one to Gansu province and one to visit the Mogao Grottoes. He told me father loved that place.

Mogao Grottoes

It wasn't long before I stepped into the entrance of the caves, admiring the beautiful drawings on the cold walls. Sunlight penetrated into the caves, giving the sculptures a shimmering layer. The treasures led me deeper into the caves which I had been told held the fascinating stories of time. I reached this cave, inside which sat a gigantic stone buddha, staring at my eyes as if it was real. Avoiding its gaze, I circled around its giant calf, touching it gently while transferring heat to the icy statue. Fatigue ran over me, and I sat down pressing my back to the buddha's foot, feeling so small next to this giant.

But something caught my eye— a slightly different coloured brick lying next to the others underneath the shadow of the buddha's foot. I squeezed my fingers into the gap between the bricks, finding it effortless to pull it out. I flipped it over, and there were three words carved in Ancient Chinese characters on the smooth surface—

“Wang Yun Shang”

My name.

The brick slipped away from my hand and fell onto the ground. H-how could my name appear in the Mogao Caves built centuries ago? I moved towards the exit.

“You can't leave now, Wang.”

A deep, cold voice echoed the words in my ears. The tunnel transformed into a freezing, endless, horrible void. I kept on running, until the surface underneath my feet vanished.

Images of life flashed in my mind, time suddenly became slow when I fell. Could this be the end?

“Wake up.”

“Hey, wake up!”

Gansu Province, Han Dynasty

I jerked awake and found myself staring into a pair of crow black eyes. Their owner had a shaved head, wore robes made of white cloth, and held a necklace of wooden spheres in his hands like a monk.

“W-where am I?” I asked the monk who just saved me. He narrowed his eyes and stared at me, then my clothes, then my shoes, then back to my eyes. “Dunhuang,” he dipped his head, “who are you, mister?”

“M-my name is Wang Yunshang,” I dipped my head, showing respect.

“Ah, so my visions were correct!” He sighed, his eyes flickered with hope. “My name is Le Zun, a monk of Chinese Buddhism.”

Le Zun! Something jumped in my mind. *The monk who built the Mogao Grottoes!* My hands clasped my mouth, revealing my surprise.

“Just the day before, I saw the buddhas. Thousands of them, and the biggest came out and told me a message. It told me I have to complete my mission—to build the grottoes holding all the stories of Chinese Buddhism. The messenger will come to me a few days later, who will dress differently among the crowd.” He held my hands. “Will you help me, Le Zun, in the name of the Buddhas?”

Later, at his home, Zun told me that although the emperor approved of the plan he had made with his partner Liang, there were many who opposed the project. Even as he told me, someone hammered at the door.

“Open the door, in the name of Official Chao!” Zun obeyed. Two men dressed in nicely designed tunics walked in. “I command you to stop this project. What kind of nonsense is this?” “If you do not cancel the project by tomorrow evening, you’ll pay in blood” He barked at Liang and stormed away.

“Stop the project!” I tried to convince the monks. “Or else you’ll be dead by tomorrow evening!” Liang shook his head. “Messenger, you do not understand our determination in completing our prophecy. How can we succeed if we give up as soon as we face an obstacle?” Liang walked out of the house. “I will tell the emperor about this accident.” I sighed.

“I don’t want to see anyone leave again...”

Zun touched my shoulder, and handed me a pendant with a small buddha hung on the red string. “My child, I know it is hard for you. For all that has happened in your life, a box has formed casing your heart. I knew it when I looked into your eyes. Now go, take my blessing with you. We can handle the rest.”

“May I ask what your blessing is?” I asked before he reached the door.

“May you find what you are looking for.”

Dunhuang, 19th Century

I was no longer at the monks’ house, but in an apartment. A different time. I coughed as clouds of smoke flew into the window next to my bed. I looked at the city outside the dusty glass—it looked similar to the cities in the present, but older. I walked to the ground floor, and found myself eavesdropping on the conversation of two men.

“Yes, yes sir, I understand. I promise you that I can discover something satisfying before the end of this month.... Ehem, yes, sorry for the inconvenience caused—” The door shut with a slam.

“Excuse me, sir? May I ask if this is somewhere near the Mogao Grottoes?”

“Huh?” His eyes widened, half because of my appearance and half because of my question. “May I ask the date?” I asked again, then he checked the calendar. “12th May, 1898.”

The man’s name was Yuanlu. He was about to be fired if he couldn’t find something special in the next few days. Somehow I felt that I knew his face. “I can help you,” I announced confidently, “I can help you make the most stunning discovery in history.”

“Ugh! Where’s the entrance?” I grunted and thumped down on the cold ground. “Maybe the monks didn’t succeed.... Maybe they were all killed on that night!” I wailed in despair.

Yuanlu stopped and came to my side. He bent down and spoke softly, “Don’t lose hope yet, and, how do you know if you’re not just a step from where you’re going?” Just when he’s about to stand up, the ground started to shake. Dust and sand filled the air and blurred my sight. I pulled Yuanlu away as we fell and rolled as the ground sank beneath.

The sinking stopped, and we walked into a tunnel of darkness. A glimpse of light was shining at the far end and we followed the light, which led us into a ginormous cave with a big Buddha sitting in the centre. It was the same cave, the same cave when I first time travelled!

Yuanlu stared at the cave in excitement. “It- it’s wonderful.” He looked at my eyes. “Thank you.” I smiled back, warmth filled my heart for the first time in many moons. “I’m so glad that the monks succeeded...” But I buried my face into my arms again, and found out that I still couldn’t ignore the fact of losing my father. Yuanlu patted my shoulder, “Nobody can stay forever, and it’s hard to go through when they leave. But what matters is that— is that

the bond and connection between you and them can stay forever.” His words were so gentle, and his eyes looked so much like my father’s. I nodded, touched the pendant and said a prayer to my father. Did I imagine it or did it really grow warm in my hand?

“It’s time to go, Wang.”

The same deep, cold sound echoed in the caves. It was the voice of the Buddha. Yuanlu walked away, leaving me and the Buddha alone.

“Wait!” I called Yuanlu, “There’s something I wanted to give you before I leave.” Yuanlu stopped and waited while I ran to him. I pulled out the pendant Le Zun gave me and pressed it into his palms.

Shanxi, the present

Things felt different when I returned home, to my present. Somehow everything had changed and was right again. Mum and sister welcomed and hugged me. Would they believe my story that love and knowledge can cross oceans of time? “Yunshang, I think it’s time for you to receive your family heirloom,” Mother handed me a red- brown wooden box with a golden lock on its top. I opened the lid carefully, and there lay the pendant, under the rust I could still see the delicate carved lines of the small Buddha, its eyes shining.

Like the same one I gave Yuanlu.

The Strength of a Blessing: A Rumination

Po Leung Kuk Choi Kai Yau School, Yuen, Leyan – 15

Perhaps, he thought, perhaps he could help.

Self-mummification was a growing phenomenon among bodhisattvas. Mountains of research scattered around his room, studies he'd kept safe from the others, almost a forbidden practice. Self-mummification would preserve a pure soul, a life of immortality waiting to be lived; a blessing from the Buddha all in itself.

There were plenty of meditation rooms at the Library Caves, he knew, and a wise premonition told him it would be a center of cultural ruin, defamation, and irreversible damage. It was all he knew to fix it.

Rays of silver reflected from the rough bamboo scrolls: an anomaly of unfulfilled prophecies he would yet to make. Its words were long etched into his mind, recitals held every minute of the day while he refused food and water, insisting the Buddha's blessing be sufficient for him to survive as long as he needed.

It was almost time now.

He was frail, cheekbones showing in place of his nutrition, and halfway dehydrated. His robe was loose, the knots needing to get tighter and tighter so it wouldn't fall off with a step of his feet.

His hands were shaking as he slathered cedar-brown clay onto his body. Stencils of seated Buddhas covered the room, he noticed, as he tried not to focus on the fact he was going to bury himself alive.

It would be worth it.

Asphyxiation was a more violent experience than he thought it would be. He held up the belt and looped it around his neck, careful not to touch any of the wet spots of clay that hadn't dried yet, breaking the crusting clay on his skin. Trembling fingers rested on top of his knees as he felt his throat constrict, dots creeping into his peripheral vision, blots of ink on a clean parchment.

He was trapped now.

"Go, go, go, let's go!"

He didn't know how long he'd been in the chamber. Decades, centuries of silence was now infiltrated by a blinding light of torches in calloused, scarred hands, teetering between a long lost savior or a final debilitating strike further into the dark.

Khaki coats flitted across the pathways, sharp rocks on the sides of the cave abrasive against poorly manufactured cotton. The shuffling of feet, and the distinctive metal clicks of a rifle loose from its holder.

People had long since grown out of a simple game of tug-of-war. A bitter yearning of conflict yet again, history repeating itself with the relentless manipulation of Father Time, a snake's tail unable to escape from its own clutches. The Civil War was coming to an end, yet the proverbial phoenix would rise from the ashes eventually.

White, blue, red. White, blue, red.

They flocked into the caves and paid no mind to the damage caused, nor the lone statue watching from afar, hiding in plain sight. The worst of it hadn't started, but every scrape, every scratch, every bump was acerbic to its skin. Injury after injury built up, blood flowing into its lifeless veins and pulsing erratically each time they pushed through.

Then the hammers hit.

It was excruciating pain, it quickly learned, that smote its heart with lightning, its lungs constricting uncontrollably, but the faceless kept going. Fractures in the Mogao Caves, fractures in their wretched morality, with no care in the world, none for the sacrifices they left in the dust of its sanctuary.

In its head, scraps of silver cloth were ripped apart, fragments of light reflecting in every direction, almost mirrors, streaking its vision with blinding rays.

How could you do this?

It was a different sort of wreckage altogether when he finally awoke once again. This time it felt the pain of separation, the twisting in his stomach indicative of a void, lost forever and sucking the joy out of it like an insatiable black hole.

The man in front of him wore a large rucksack, carrying all sorts of mining and survival gear. The words "Warner, Langdon" were sewn onto the hem of his bag.

His eyes glittered with wonder as he stared at the room - or was it greed? - and at the murals, the statues, near-identical yet irreplaceable. A tentative unbuckling of his rucksack, as if one forceful movement would send the rocks tumbling over his head.

Each invaluable he removed, flesh peeled apart off of its crusted skin and left welts, bruises unseen by any outsider under the guise of mud left to dry for too long. Its eyes suffered a dull ache, a slight sting. Closing its eyes was not an option; it'd inadvertently chosen to learn the unadulterated truth as a trapped soul. Blood would be free-flowing if not for the fact it was dead.

Time warped around it as the man - Warner, Langdon - unraveled stone after stone, piece after piece, skin after skin. Searing pain set its body alight with a spark: certainly the most alive it'd felt in a while. For a moment, there was nothing but white, silver without the glamour, piercing its eardrums as torment was the only thing left.

It remained transfixed even when the tapping of footsteps faded into the distance. Accompanied by a cheerful whistle, a signal for success with no indication of awareness for the detritus Warner had impaled onto the lone corpse.

All he'd ever wanted was to prepare for the sake of humanity, preparing to protect all that he loved and all that he did not. That was all he knew how to do, what he persevered for when no one else could.

He wanted to appeal to the masses, be the voice of their light and guide them towards the right path.

The Buddha would no doubt be satisfied, he had thought. And he would be behind it, be the sacrificial lamb for the kindness in people's hearts.

Was I too late?

Tremors coursed through the statue. Yet, stubborn fingertips, wrinkled with age and long-awaited decay, still held onto a single silver thread of faith.

A gloved hand clasped onto a silver locket. Billows of smoke rose above the hills.

Excavating the cave was a risk, and he tried not to imagine what it would be like buried alive under merciless stone. He had no choice, a product of his circumstance; an empty, woolen coin pouch hanging from his trouser pocket was quite telling.

At least he had his locket with him.

He flipped it open in a practiced manner, and an old woman with her eyes half-closed in the ghost of a smile stood in the image. In her arms was his own youthful visage from when he'd graduated high school. Those were the good days -- once carefree, before the Lugou Bridge Incident.

It hadn't been long since the photo was taken, yet looking into the glass cover felt like an invasion of another timeline, an alternate world where innocence remained untouched.

The rest of the crew entered the cave in a lazy trudge under the bare sliver of 5-o'clock sunlight.

He knew full well the Mogao Caves were a historical wonder, plenty of murals and statues waiting to be found and recovered and reclaimed. Invading it like this made his heart sink.

This was pure conjecture, he told himself. There had to be a good reason why they were heading towards the dark.

A click on his helmet flickered a small light onto the rugged surface. The faint outline of his grease-smudged palms was dim under his nose if he squinted.

The grotto was a maze, each unsuspecting door a portal to worlds and dimensions and universes. A spark of familiarity struck in his mind, each neuron firing and colliding at a lost memory that wasn't his.

He'd reached the epicenter of his curiosity in the form of a small room. Fully painted, murals covered the walls and finally peaked at the roof, highlighted by a circle of triangles and lines. Under the dust he imagined the vibrancy of cobalt, vermillion, viridian.

Depictions of ancient figures were plastered across the walls and carried with their daily life with a certain resplendence like it was glowing, with happiness, in the downpour of cement. His gaze swept across these paintings and took in every detail, even the gritty textures that had resulted from the years and years of wearing off, revealing the sand and the stone underneath.

Oh, but it was a glimpse into what could have been.

'Hello?'

He couldn't have heard that.

'Hello,' it said again.

At the center of the room was the meditating statue of a monk, a haunting, troubled peace in its eyes. He stared.

"Who- What?" He raised his chisel in front of him, a trembling defense, a tentative leg forward.

The statue stared back at him, eyes wide and unblinking. Something captivating about those eyes held him in place and petrified him with a desperate plea. 'Please,' it said, and his grip on the chisel shifted imperceptibly, 'I don't have much time.'

It was the quivering croak in its voice that convinced him.

There he was now, suddenly in the position of a retired bodhisattva with a hard clay crust unrelentingly clinging, growing on his skin. Nothing budged when he tried to move, yet the view of the outside world was clear as day.

Was he dead?

The scene unfolding before him struck him with estranged familiarity as he was surrounded by yelling and khaki and red and blue and white. Flashes of different memories, completely different moments left him with a wide-eyed strain on his head, and suddenly he could feel so much.

Soldiers.

Lightning.

Warner, Langdon.

Unwilling betrayal.

A zephyr of time flurried past, leaving him in the aftermath, but he stood, immobilized against waves crashing onto the shore and fracturing the cliffs with a loud crack.

'You were the first.'

The old monk's voice grew sentimental, emotion unforgotten throughout the decades. It would smile if it could, but not without a desolate glint in its eyes.

The statement was a wisp of air drifting in his head. He was still stuck to the ground, his feet suddenly becoming heavier with the memories the monk had given him, one for the price of eternal agony.

Yet another unspoken, unanswered prayer hung in the air.

"I have to go," he sputtered, and the light flickered. He didn't dare look the monk in the eyes.

A pause. Suddenly he could move his legs again. 'I know,' the monk's voice echoed from the distance of a long tunnel - did he imagine a sob? - 'go, then, young one.'

It'd lost grip of the last filament, silver that lasted for centuries living the final moments of its waning. Now, he was ready.

Was it worth it?

No, no, it wasn't.

Trust, misplaced, gave the monk's lifeless silhouette a strange sheen where its eyes should be. The monk sat with copper palms meticulously placed, fingers pointed upwards, a fruitless attempt at finding its last salvation. A final, futile sacrifice to the Buddha.

It was its choice to end up like this, after all. It was idealistic once, aiming to redeem the good of humanity; silver threads delicately woven to form a cape, a symbol of heroism, fighting, fighting for the better.

It was until the light completely faded from the room that the excavator stopped walking.

A swirl of memories in his head, "please" and "I don't have much time" and "don't leave" brought to the forefront, memories that weren't his, that never meant to be his, he convinced himself.

There was a commotion outside the cave now, muffled yells reverberating in his ears. He knew they were looking for him. A stern telling-off he already knew would come out of his other ear.

Bile danced at the back of his throat.

The voices were getting closer as reality set in, yanking him from spiritual stupor, and he snapped his head towards the monk, finding no longer the bronze gleam.

Hands grabbed at him before he knew it, dragging him out of the cave. But he only had eyes for his own oasis, at the coruscating springs he went to think; at the neighborhood park, the tinkling of laughter he never scraped from the concrete; at the home he imagined his mother would be, knitting in her chair, a warm meal waiting for him on the kitchen table.

...The good of humanity. What's it to you?

The sun was too much for him now; he'd gotten accustomed to the dark. He stared blankly at the tattered miner in front of him.

"Can't believe you're alive," he heard, "Was finding you for days, your mother was so worried—"

You could make a run for it right now.

"I lied to the sergeant about searching for you and everything, we can't afford to lose more—"

What would you even do? How could you ever make it better?

"—people, you know how worked up Zhang always gets when new reinforcements arrive—"

You couldn't do it. You would never have the power to stop it.

"Hey, wait, are you—?"

That crippled him, hands falling in place onto his head as ones of similar contour did so many years ago, burdened with the light.

And in the corner of his eye, he saw a flash of silver.